Frogs

ARISTOPHANES

c. 446–386 BC

Frogs

Βάτραχοι

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited



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Frogs · Aristophanes (c. 446–386 BC)

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INTRODUCTION

Athens in 405 BC was losing a long war, and its great tragic poets were gone: Euripides and Sophocles had both died within the past year or so. So Dionysus, god of the theater, puts on Heracles' lion skin, takes up a club, and sets off for the underworld with his slave Xanthias to bring Euripides back.

The journey is a run of comic set pieces—a croaking chorus of frogs on the lake of the dead, a band of initiates singing to Iacchus, a doorkeeper who can't tell the god from the slave. Then the play turns into a contest in Hades between Aeschylus, the grand old poet of Athens' heroic generation, and Euripides, the clever modern. They mock each other's prologues and songs, weigh their verses on a scale, and argue over what poets are for.

Frogs won first prize at the Lenaea and was, unusually, given a second performance. It is the first sustained piece of literary criticism in Greek, and still very funny.

Frogs

Athens, then the road to the underworld, the lake of the dead, and Pluto's palace in Hades.

PROLOGUE

Dionysus and his slave Xanthias get directions from Heracles, then cross the lake with Charon and the frogs.

XANTHIAS [1] Master, shall I say one of the usual things, the ones the audience always laughs at?

DIONYSUS [3] By Zeus, anything you like, except "I'm getting crushed." Watch out for that one. It just makes me sick by now.

XANTHIAS [5] Not some other witty one either?

DIONYSUS Anything but "Oof, I'm being squashed!"

XANTHIAS [6] Well then, shall I say the really funny one?

DIONYSUS By Zeus, go right ahead, don't be shy. Just make sure you don't say that one—

XANTHIAS [7] Which one?

DIONYSUS [8] —where you shift your carrying pole and say you need to take a shit.

XANTHIAS [9] Not even that I've got such a load on me that if somebody doesn't take it off, I'm going to fart it out?

DIONYSUS [11] Please, no, I beg you. Not unless I'm about to throw up.

XANTHIAS [12] Then why did I have to carry all this baggage, if I'm not going to do any of the stuff Phrynichus and Lycis and Ameipsias always do?[1]

DIONYSUS [16] Well, don't. Because when I'm sitting in the audience and I see one of those clever tricks, I go home more than a year older.

XANTHIAS [19] Oh, my poor, god-forsaken neck: it gets squashed, but it isn't allowed to say the funny bit.

DIONYSUS [21] Isn't this outrageous, the height of pampering? Here am I, Dionysus, son of Wine Jar, walking and slogging away myself, while I give this one a ride so he won't wear himself out or have to carry a load.[2]

XANTHIAS [25] So I'm not carrying anything?

DIONYSUS How can you be carrying when you're being carried?

XANTHIAS [26] Well, I'm carrying this stuff.

DIONYSUS How?

XANTHIAS Very heavily.

DIONYSUS [27] Isn't the donkey carrying the weight you're carrying?

XANTHIAS [28] Not the load I've got on me and am carrying, it isn't. By Zeus, no.

DIONYSUS [29] How can you be carrying it, when you're being carried by someone else?

XANTHIAS [30] I don't know. But this shoulder of mine is getting crushed.

DIONYSUS [31] Well, since you say the donkey's no help to you, take your turn: pick up the donkey and carry it.

---

1 Phrynichus, Lycis and Ameipsias were comic poets, rivals of Aristophanes; Ameipsias' play beat *Frogs*' predecessor *Clouds*.
2 "Son of Wine Jar" (Stamnios) is a comic patronymic in place of the god's real one, "son of Zeus."

XANTHIAS [33] Oh, damn my luck! Why wasn't I in the sea battle? Then I'd be telling you to go howl, long and loud.[3]

DIONYSUS [35] Get down, you rascal. I'm already near the door here, where I was supposed to turn off first. Boy! Boy! Hey, boy!

HERACLES [38] Who's banging on the door? Whoever it was charged at it like a Centaur. Tell me, what was all that?

DIONYSUS [40] Boy.

XANTHIAS What is it?

DIONYSUS Didn't you notice?

XANTHIAS Notice what?

DIONYSUS [41] How scared he was of me.

XANTHIAS By Zeus, yes: scared you'd gone mad.

HERACLES [42] By Demeter, I can't help laughing. I'm biting my lip, but I'm laughing anyway.

DIONYSUS [44] My dear fellow, come here. I need something from you.

HERACLES [45] I just can't shoo this laughter away, seeing a lion skin draped over a saffron gown. What's the idea? What are a woman's boot and a club doing together? Where on earth have you been traveling?[4]

DIONYSUS [48] I was serving aboard Cleisthenes—[5]

HERACLES [49] And you fought at sea?

DIONYSUS Yes, and we sank enemy ships, twelve or thirteen of them.

HERACLES [51] You two?

DIONYSUS By Apollo, yes.

---

3 Slaves who rowed at the battle of Arginusae (406 BC) were rewarded with their freedom.

4 The saffron gown and soft boots were women's wear (and part of Dionysus' costume); the lion skin and club are Heracles' trademarks.

5 Cleisthenes, a man Aristophanes regularly mocks for his beardlessness and effeminacy; "serving aboard" him also hints at sex.

XANTHIAS And then I woke up.

DIONYSUS [52] And there on the ship, while I was reading the *Andromeda* to myself, all of a sudden a longing struck my heart. You can't imagine how hard.[6]

HERACLES [55] A longing? How big?

DIONYSUS Small. About the size of Molon.[7]

HERACLES [56] For a woman?

DIONYSUS No.

HERACLES For a boy, then?

DIONYSUS Not at all.

HERACLES [57] For a man, then?

DIONYSUS Aaagh!

HERACLES Did you get it on with Cleisthenes?

DIONYSUS [58] Don't make fun of me, brother. I'm in a really bad way: that's the kind of desire that's tearing me to pieces.

HERACLES [60] What kind, little brother?

DIONYSUS I can't explain it. But I'll tell you in riddles anyway. Have you ever had a sudden craving for pea soup?

HERACLES [63] Pea soup? Wow! Ten thousand times in my life.

DIONYSUS [64] Am I making it clear, or shall I put it another way?

HERACLES [65] Not about pea soup, please. I understand perfectly.

DIONYSUS [66] Well, that's the kind of longing that's devouring me —for Euripides.

HERACLES [67] What, and him dead?

DIONYSUS [68] Yes, and nobody on earth could talk me out of going after him.

HERACLES [69] What, down to Hades?

---

6 *Andromeda*, a romantic tragedy by Euripides produced in 412 BC.
7 Molon, an actor, apparently a very large man.

DIONYSUS [70] Yes, by Zeus, and further down, if there's anything further.

HERACLES [71] What for?

DIONYSUS I need a clever poet. The good ones are gone, and the ones who are left are bad.

HERACLES [73] What? Isn't Iophon alive?[8]

DIONYSUS Well, that's the one good thing still left—if it even is that. I'm not really sure how that one stands, either.

HERACLES [76] Then if you have to bring someone up from there, why not bring Sophocles rather than Euripides?

DIONYSUS [78] Not until I've got Iophon on his own and tested how he rings without Sophocles. Besides, Euripides is a slippery customer: he might even try to run away up here with me. Sophocles, though, was easygoing here and he's easygoing there.

HERACLES [83] And where's Agathon?

DIONYSUS He's left me and gone away, a good poet and much missed by his friends.[9]

HERACLES [85] Where on earth has the poor man gone?

DIONYSUS To the Feast of the Blessed.[10]

HERACLES [86] And Xenocles?[11]

DIONYSUS To hell with him, by Zeus!

HERACLES [87] And Pythangelus?

XANTHIAS And nobody says a word about me, with my shoulder getting worn down like this.

8 Iophon, son of Sophocles and a tragic poet himself, was suspected of getting help from his father.
9 Agathon, a tragic poet, had moved to the court of King Archelaus of Macedon.
10 A play on the Isles of the Blessed, the heroes' paradise; Archelaus' court was famously lavish.
11 Xenocles and Pythangelus were minor tragic poets of the day.

HERACLES [89] But aren't there other young lads around here writing tragedies, more than ten thousand of them, and a mile more talkative than Euripides?

DIONYSUS [92] Those are runts left on the vine, chatterboxes, choirs of twittering swallows, butchers of the art. Give them a chorus and they're gone in a flash, after pissing on tragedy just once. Look as hard as you like, you won't find a fertile poet anymore, one who could sound out a noble phrase.

HERACLES [98] Fertile how?

DIONYSUS Fertile like this: a man who'll come out with something daring, along the lines of "Aether, Zeus's little parlor," or "the foot of time," or "a mind that would not swear upon the sacrifice, and a tongue that perjured itself apart from the mind."[12]

HERACLES [103] And you like that stuff?

DIONYSUS Like it? I'm more than crazy about it.

HERACLES [104] Come on, it's sheer flimflam, and you know it.

DIONYSUS [105] "Do not take up lodging in my mind": you have a house of your own.

HERACLES [106] Well, it obviously is just plain rotten.

DIONYSUS [107] You teach me how to eat dinner.

XANTHIAS And nobody says a word about me.

DIONYSUS [108] Anyway, the reason I've come in this get-up, dressed as you: it's so you can tell me about your hosts, the ones you used that time you went after Cerberus, in case I need them. Tell me about them: harbors, bakeries, brothels, rest stops, turnoffs, springs, roads, towns, lodgings, landladies—the places with the fewest bedbugs.

XANTHIAS [115] And nobody says a word about me.

HERACLES [116] You poor devil, are you really going to dare go too —you?

12 Parodies of Euripidean phrases; the last twists *Hippolytus* 612, "My tongue has sworn, my mind is unsworn."

DIONYSUS [117] No more of that. Just tell me which road will get us down to Hades fastest. And don't tell me one that's too hot, or one that's too cold.

HERACLES [120] Well now, which one shall I tell you about first? Which? There's one by way of a rope and a stool: you hang yourself.

DIONYSUS [122] Stop it. That one's stifling.

HERACLES [123] Well, there's a short, well-beaten path—through the mortar.

DIONYSUS [124] You mean hemlock?

HERACLES [125] Exactly.

DIONYSUS A cold, wintry one. It freezes your shins straightaway.[13]

HERACLES [127] Want me to tell you a fast one, downhill?

DIONYSUS [128] Yes, by Zeus. I'm not much of a walker.

HERACLES [129] Then stroll on down to the Ceramicus.[14]

DIONYSUS And then what?

HERACLES [130] Climb up the tall tower—

DIONYSUS And do what?

HERACLES [131] —and watch the torch being let go from up there. Then when the spectators shout "Let them go!", let yourself go too.

DIONYSUS [133] Where?

HERACLES Down.

DIONYSUS [134] But I'd splatter two pies' worth of brains. I won't take that road.

HERACLES [135] Which one, then?

---

13 Hemlock was ground in a mortar; its poison numbs the body from the legs upward.

14 The Ceramicus, a district of Athens where a torch race was held; the runners set off when the torch was dropped from a tower.

DIONYSUS [136] The one you went down by that time.

HERACLES But it's a long voyage. First you'll come to a huge lake, absolutely bottomless.

DIONYSUS [138] And how do I get across?

HERACLES [139] In a tiny little boat, this big, an old man, a ferryman, will take you over. His fare is two obols.

DIONYSUS [141] Wow! Those two obols have such power everywhere! How did they get down there too?

HERACLES [142] Theseus brought them. After that you'll see snakes and wild beasts by the thousand, most terrible.[15]

DIONYSUS [144] Don't try to scare me or frighten me. You won't turn me back.

HERACLES [145] Then lots of mud and ever-flowing shit. And lying in it, anyone who ever wronged a guest, or screwed a boy and filched the money back, or beat his mother, or punched his father in the jaw, or swore a false oath, or copied out a speech of Morsimus.[16]

DIONYSUS [152] By the gods, they should add anyone who learned Cinesias' war dance, too.[17]

HERACLES [154] Next, a breath of pipes will surround you, and you'll see a most beautiful light, just like here, and myrtle groves, and happy bands of men and women, and loud clapping of hands.

DIONYSUS [158] And who are they, exactly?

HERACLES The initiates—

15 Two obols was a familiar sum at Athens (the festival allowance, for one); the joke credits Theseus, Athens' founding hero, who also went down to Hades, with taking the custom there.
16 Morsimus, a tragic poet Aristophanes considered dreadful.
17 Cinesias, a dithyrambic poet mocked for his skinniness and newfangled music.

XANTHIAS [159] By Zeus, I'm the donkey carrying the Mysteries, that's for sure. But I'm not holding this stuff any longer.[18]

HERACLES [161] —who'll tell you everything you need. They live right beside the road, at the very doors of Pluto. And so, a fond farewell, brother.

DIONYSUS [164] By Zeus, you too: take care. You, pick up the bedding again.

XANTHIAS [166] Before I've even put it down?

DIONYSUS Yes, and be quick about it.

XANTHIAS [167] No, please, I beg you. Hire one of the dead people being carried out, someone who's going that way anyway.

DIONYSUS [169] And if I can't find one?

XANTHIAS Then take me.

DIONYSUS Good idea. And look, they're carrying out a dead man right here. You there—yes, I mean you, the dead one! Fellow, do you want to carry a bit of baggage down to Hades?

CORPSE [173] How much?

DIONYSUS This.

CORPSE You'll pay two drachmas?

DIONYSUS [174] Zeus, no. Less.

CORPSE Keep going, you lot.

DIONYSUS [175] Hold on, my good fellow, let's see if we can come to terms.

CORPSE [176] If you don't put down two drachmas, don't bother talking.

DIONYSUS [177] Take nine obols.

CORPSE I'd sooner come back to life!

XANTHIAS [178] How stuck-up the damned thing is! He'll be sorry. I'll walk.

---

18 A proverb: donkeys carried the supplies for the Mysteries at Eleusis, all the work and none of the rite.

DIONYSUS [179] You're a good man and a true. Let's head for the boat.

CHARON [180] Ohop! Bring her in!

XANTHIAS [181] What's this?

DIONYSUS This? By Zeus, it's the lake he was telling us about, and I can see a boat.

XANTHIAS [183] By Poseidon, and that's Charon there.

DIONYSUS [184] Hello, Charon! Hello, Charon! Hello, Charon!

CHARON [185] Who's for rest from troubles and cares? Who's for the Plain of Lethe, or the Donkey-Shearings, or the Cerberians, or the crows, or Taenarum?[19]

DIONYSUS [188] Me.

CHARON Get in, quick.

DIONYSUS Where are you planning to land? Really at the crows?

CHARON [189] Yes, by Zeus—for your sake, anyway. Come on, get in.

DIONYSUS [190] Boy, over here.

CHARON I don't take slaves, unless he fought in the sea battle to save his hide.

XANTHIAS [192] By Zeus, I didn't. I happened to have eye trouble.

CHARON [193] Then you can run around the lake, can't you?

XANTHIAS [194] So where should I wait?

CHARON By the Withering Stone, at the rest stop.

DIONYSUS [195] Got it?

XANTHIAS Got it perfectly. Damn my luck, what bad omen did I run into when I set out?

19 "To the crows" was the Greek for "go to hell"; the "Donkey-Shearings" means nowhere at all, and Taenarum, a cape in the Peloponnese, had an entrance to the underworld.

CHARON [197] Sit to the oar. Anyone else sailing, hurry up. You there, what are you doing?

DIONYSUS [198] What am I doing? What else but sitting on the oar, where you told me to?

CHARON [200] Sit down here, won't you, Potbelly?

DIONYSUS There.

CHARON [201] Now put your hands forward and stretch out your arms.

DIONYSUS There.

CHARON [202] Stop fooling around! Brace your feet and row like you mean it.

DIONYSUS [203] And how am I supposed to row, when I'm inexperienced, unseafaring, un-Salamined?[20]

CHARON [205] Easily. You'll hear the loveliest songs, as soon as you dip your oar—

DIONYSUS [206] Whose?

CHARON [207] Frog-swans. Amazing.

DIONYSUS Call the stroke, then.

CHARON [208] O-op, op! O-op, op!

20 The men of Salamis, an island off Athens, were proverbial oarsmen.

FROGS

209 Brekekekex koax koax,
brekekekex koax koax.
Marsh-born children of the springs,
let's sound our cry of hymns
in tune with the pipe, my sweet-voiced song,
koax koax,
the song we raised for Nysian
Dionysus, son of Zeus,
in the Marshes,
when the crowd of people, reeling from the revel,
at the holy Feast of Pots
comes trooping through my sacred ground.
Brekekekex koax koax.[21]

DIONYSUS

222 Well, I'm starting to get a pain
in my ass, you koax koax.
Not that you care, I suppose.

FROGS 225 Brekekekex koax koax.

DIONYSUS 226 To hell with you, koax and all! / You're nothing but koax.

FROGS

228 And rightly so, you busybody.
For the Muses of the lovely lyre love me,
and horn-hoofed Pan, who plays the reedy pipe,
and Apollo the lyre-player delights in me too,
for the reed I grow for him, the bridge beneath his lyre,
here in the waters of the marsh.
Brekekekex koax koax.

21 Dionysus had a sanctuary "in the Marshes" at Athens; the Feast of Pots was the last day of his spring festival, the Anthesteria.

DIONYSUS

236 Well, I've got blisters,
and my ass has been sweating for ages,
and any minute now it'll poke out and say—

FROGS 239 Brekekekex koax koax.

DIONYSUS 240 Please, you song-loving tribe, / stop.

FROGS

241 No, we'll sing all the louder,
if ever on sunny
days
we've leapt through the sedge
and the rushes, rejoicing in our song's
many-diving melodies,
or, fleeing the rain of Zeus,
we've sung, deep down in the water,
our shimmering dance
in bubbly-splashy-plops.

DIONYSUS 251 Brekekekex koax koax. / I'm taking that one off you.

FROGS 253 Then we're in for something awful.

DIONYSUS 254 Something worse for me, if I row / until I burst.

FROGS 256 Brekekekex koax koax.

DIONYSUS 257 Go howl. I don't care.

FROGS

258 Oh yes, we'll croak
as loud as our throats
can hold, all day long.

DIONYSUS 261 Brekekekex koax koax. / You won't beat me at that.

FROGS 263 And you certainly won't beat us.

DIONYSUS

264 And you won't beat me,
not ever. I'll shout,
all day long if I have to,
brekekekex koax koax,
till I beat you at your koax,
brekekekex koax koax.

268 I knew I'd stop you and your koax in the end.

CHARON 269 Whoa, stop, stop! Bring her in with the oars. Get out. Pay the fare.

DIONYSUS 270 Here you are, two obols. Xanthias! Where's Xanthias? Hey, Xanthias!

XANTHIAS 272 Hallooo!

DIONYSUS Come over here.

XANTHIAS Hello, master.

DIONYSUS 273 What's it like over there?

XANTHIAS Darkness and mud.

DIONYSUS 274 So did you see the father-beaters anywhere around there, and the perjurers he told us about?

XANTHIAS 275 Didn't you?

DIONYSUS 276 By Poseidon, I did, and I can see them right now. Well then, what shall we do?[22]

XANTHIAS 277 Best to keep moving, because this is the place where he said the terrible beasts were.

DIONYSUS 279 He'll be sorry. He was just bragging to scare me, out of jealousy, knowing what a fighter I am. There's nobody as vain as Heracles. Me, I'd pray to run into something and win some exploit worthy of the trip.

XANTHIAS 285 By Zeus, I can hear some sort of noise.

DIONYSUS 286 Where, where is it?

22 Dionysus is looking at the audience.

XANTHIAS Behind us.

DIONYSUS Get behind, then.

XANTHIAS [287] No, it's in front.

DIONYSUS Get in front, then.

XANTHIAS [288] Oh, by Zeus, now I see a huge beast.

DIONYSUS [289] What sort?

XANTHIAS Terrible. It keeps turning into all sorts of things: one moment a cow, now a mule, and now again a gorgeous woman.

DIONYSUS [291] Where is she? Let me go at her.

XANTHIAS [292] But it's not a woman any more. Now it's a dog.

DIONYSUS [293] Then it's Empusa.[23]

XANTHIAS Well, its whole face is blazing with fire.

DIONYSUS [294] And has she got a bronze leg?

XANTHIAS [295] By Poseidon, yes, and the other one's made of cow shit, I swear.

DIONYSUS [296] Where can I turn?

XANTHIAS Where can I?

DIONYSUS [297] Priest, protect me, so I can come drinking with you![24]

XANTHIAS [298] We're done for, lord Heracles!

DIONYSUS Please, man, don't call me that! Don't say the name!

XANTHIAS [300] Dionysus, then.

DIONYSUS That's even worse than the other. Keep going the way you're going.

XANTHIAS [301] This way, this way, master.

DIONYSUS [302] What is it?

23 Empusa, a shape-shifting bogey sent by Hecate, said to have one leg of bronze.
24 Dionysus runs to his own priest, who had the seat of honor in the front row of the theater.

XANTHIAS Cheer up, it's all turned out well. We can say, like Hegelochus, "Out of the waves I see once more a clam." Empusa's gone.[25]

DIONYSUS [305] Swear it.

XANTHIAS By Zeus.

DIONYSUS [306] Swear it again.

XANTHIAS By Zeus.

DIONYSUS Swear.

XANTHIAS By Zeus.

DIONYSUS [307] Oh, poor me, how pale I went when I saw her!

XANTHIAS [308] And this thing here got so scared it turned brown on your behalf.

DIONYSUS [309] Oh, where have these troubles fallen on me from? Which of the gods shall I blame for my destruction?

XANTHIAS [311] "Aether, Zeus's little parlor"? Or "the foot of time"?

DIONYSUS [312] Hey, you.

XANTHIAS What is it?

DIONYSUS Didn't you hear?

XANTHIAS Hear what?

DIONYSUS [313] A breath of pipes.

XANTHIAS I did. And a breeze of torches wafted over me, very mystical.

DIONYSUS [315] Let's crouch down quietly and listen.

25 The actor Hegelochus, in Euripides' *Orestes*, mispronounced *galēn'* ("calm") as *galēn* ("weasel"); "clam" for "calm" gives the same effect.

PARODOS

A chorus of initiates sings hymns to Iacchus and Demeter and mocks Athenian politicians.

CHORUS 316 Iacchus, Iacchus! / Iacchus, Iacchus![26]

XANTHIAS 318 That's it, master: the initiates he told us about are celebrating somewhere around here. Anyway, they're singing the Iacchus hymn, the one Diagoras sings.[27]

DIONYSUS 321 I think so too. So the best thing is to keep quiet until we know for sure.

CHORUS

324 Iacchus, much-honored, dwelling here in your shrine,
Iacchus, Iacchus,
come to dance across this meadow
to your holy companions,
shaking the fruitful
myrtle crown that blooms
around your head, and stamping with a bold
foot our unbridled,
play-loving rite,
that holds the greatest share of the Graces, the pure and holy
dance for your holy initiates.

XANTHIAS 337 Lady, much-honored daughter of Demeter, what a sweet smell of pork has wafted over me![28]

DIONYSUS 339 Then keep still, won't you, and maybe you'll get some sausage too.

26 Iacchus, a god of the Eleusinian Mysteries, identified with Dionysus; his name was shouted in the procession from Athens to Eleusis.
27 Diagoras of Melos, a notorious atheist condemned for mocking the Mysteries.
28 Each initiate sacrificed a piglet to Demeter and Persephone.

CHORUS

Rouse the blazing torches, for he comes, shaking them in
his hands,
Iacchus, Iacchus,
the light-bearing star of our nighttime rite.
The meadow blazes with flame;
old men's knees are leaping;
they shake off their sorrows
and the long seasons of their ancient years
at your holy rite.
And you, ablaze with your torch,
lead forward to the flowering marshy plain,
blessed one, the young who make the dance.

Let there be holy silence, and let him stand aside from our choruses who is a stranger to words like these, or is not pure in mind; who has never seen or danced the rites of the noble Muses, or been initiated into the Bacchic mysteries of the tongue of bull-eating Cratinus; who enjoys clownish words when they're out of place; who doesn't put an end to hateful faction or deal kindly with his fellow citizens, but stirs it up and fans it, greedy for his own gain; who, holding office while the city is tossed by storms, takes bribes; who betrays a fort or ships, or smuggles forbidden goods out of Aegina—I mean Thorycion, that wretched tax collector—sending oar pads and sailcloth and pitch across to Epidaurus;[29] or who talks someone into providing money for the enemy's ships; or shits on the shrines of Hecate while singing for the circular choruses; or who, as a politician, nibbles away the poets' pay because he was made fun of in the ancestral rites of Dionysus. To all these I proclaim, and again I proclaim, and a third time I proclaim:

29 Cratinus, the great comic poet of the previous generation ("bull-eater" was a title of Dionysus); Thorycion is otherwise unknown, here accused of supplying the enemy fleet at Epidaurus.

stand aside from the initiates' dances. And you, raise up the song and our all-night revels, which befit this festival.[30]

372 Now go, each of you, boldly
into the flowery hollows
of the meadows, stamping,
and mocking,
and playing and jeering:
we've had lunch enough.

378 Now step out, and be sure to lift up
the Savior Goddess nobly,
singing her praise aloud,
who promises to keep
our land safe through all its seasons,
even if Thorycion doesn't want it.

384 Come now, raise another kind of hymn: honor the fruit-bearing queen, the goddess Demeter, and sing her glory in holy songs.

386 Demeter, queen of the pure rites,
stand by us,
and keep your own chorus safe,
and let me, safely, all day long,
play and dance;

391 and let me say many funny things,
and many serious things too, and,
when I've played and joked in a way
worthy of your festival,
win, and wear the victor's ribbons.

396 Come on, now,
call the youthful god here too
with songs, the fellow traveler of our dance.

30 "Circular choruses" were dithyrambs: the target is Cinesias, said to have fouled a shrine of Hecate.

Iacchus, much-honored, who found
the sweetest song of our festival, come along with us
to the goddess,
and show how without toil
you travel a long road.
Iacchus, lover of the dance, escort me on my way.

For it was you who, for a laugh
and to save money, ripped this little sandal
and this rag,
and you found a way for us
to play and dance without paying a penny.
Iacchus, lover of the dance, escort me on my way.

For just now, with a sidelong glance,
I caught sight of a girl, a very pretty
playmate,
and through a tear in her little dress
a nipple was peeking out.
Iacchus, lover of the dance, escort me on my way.

DIONYSUS

And me, somehow I always like
to follow along, and I want
to play and dance with her.

XANTHIAS Me too!

CHORUS

So shall we all together
make fun of Archedemus?
At seven he still hadn't cut his citizen teeth.[31]

But now he's a leader of the people
among the dead up there,
and he's top of the villainy over there.

31 Archedemus, a popular leader accused of not being a true-born Athenian; boys were enrolled in their phratry (clan) as children, and the Greek puns on "clansmen" (*phrateras*) and "teeth."

And I hear that Cleisthenes' son
is plucking his asshole at the tombs
and tearing at his cheeks;[32]

and he was beating his breast, bent over,
and weeping and wailing
for Sebinus, whoever he is, of Anaphlystus.[33]

And they say Callias,
this son of Hippobinus,
fights at sea in a lion skin made of pussy.[34]

DIONYSUS

Could you tell the two of us
where Pluto lives around here?
We're strangers, just arrived.

CHORUS

You needn't go far,
or ask me again:
you've come right to his door, believe me.

DIONYSUS Pick it up again, boy.

XANTHIAS What's this business now? Same old "Corinth, son of Zeus," in the bedding.[35]

32 Tearing hair and cheeks were gestures of mourning; plucking the anus was a depilation practice associated with men who were penetrated.
33 Puns: Sebinus suggests *binein*, "to fuck," and Anaphlystus, a real Attic deme, suggests *anaphlan*, "to jerk off."
34 Callias, the richest man in Athens, was son of Hipponicus; "Hippobinus" makes it "Horse-Fucker."
35 "Corinth, son of Zeus" was a proverb for tiresome repetition; *Korinthos* also suggests *koreis*, "bedbugs."

CHORUS

Go now
into the goddess's holy circle, through her flowering grove,
at play, all who share in this festival the gods love;
and I'll go with the girls and the women,
where they keep the night-long vigil for the goddess, to
carry the holy light.

Let's go to the meadows
full of roses and flowers,
playing in our own way,
the way of the loveliest dances,
which the blessed
Fates bring together.

For the sun and the joyful light
belong to us alone,
all of us who have been initiated
and have led righteous
lives toward strangers
and toward our fellow citizens.

FIRST LYRIC SCENE

At Pluto's door, Dionysus and Xanthias keep swapping the lion skin as Heracles' old victims and admirers appear.

DIONYSUS Right, so how do I knock on this door? How? How do the locals knock around here, I wonder?

XANTHIAS Quit stalling and give that door a taste of you. You've got Heracles' outfit and Heracles' guts.

DIONYSUS Boy! Boy!

AEACUS Who's there?

DIONYSUS Heracles the mighty.

AEACUS You disgusting, shameless, reckless creature, you vile, all-vile, vilest of the vile! You drove off our dog Cerberus, throttled him, bolted, and got clean away with him, the dog I

was guarding! But now you're caught in the middle. So fast does the black-hearted rock of Styx and the blood-dripping crag of Acheron hold you under guard, and the prowling hounds of Cocytus, and the hundred-headed Viper, who will rend your guts to shreds! A Tartessian lamprey shall fasten on your lungs, and your two kidneys, bloodied, bowels and all, shall the Teithrasian Gorgons tear apart. To fetch them I now direct my racing foot![36]

XANTHIAS [479] Hey, you, what have you done?

DIONYSUS I've shat myself. Call on the god![37]

XANTHIAS [480] You ridiculous creature, get up, quick, before some stranger sees you!

DIONYSUS [481] But I'm feeling faint. Here, bring me a sponge for my heart.

XANTHIAS [483] There, take it, hold it on.

DIONYSUS Where is it?

XANTHIAS Golden gods! *That's* where you keep your heart?

DIONYSUS [484] It got scared and crawled down into my lower belly.

XANTHIAS [486] You're the biggest coward of all gods and men!

DIONYSUS Me? How can I be a coward when I asked you for a sponge? No other man would have done that.

XANTHIAS [488] Then what would he have done?

DIONYSUS [489] If he were a coward, he'd have lain there sniffing it. But I got up, and what's more, I wiped myself.

XANTHIAS [491] What bravery, by Poseidon!

DIONYSUS I think so too, by Zeus. And you weren't scared by all his thundering words and threats?

XANTHIAS [493] No, by Zeus, I didn't give them a thought.

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36 Aeacus' threats parody high tragic diction, then sink into the everyday: Tartessus in Spain was famous for its lampreys, and Teithras was a village in Attica.
37 A twist on the ritual formula at a libation, "It is poured, call on the god" (ekkechutai); Dionysus says enkechoda, "I've shat myself."

DIONYSUS [494] All right then, since you're so gutsy and brave, you be me. Take this club and the lion skin, if your guts are so fearless. And I'll take my turn as your baggage carrier.

XANTHIAS [498] Hand them over, quick. I've no choice but to obey. Now take a look at Heraclexanthias and see whether I turn out a coward with a spirit like yours.

DIONYSUS [501] No, by Zeus, you look exactly like that rascal from Melite who needs a whipping. Come on, then, let me pick up this baggage.[38]

MAID [503] Heracles, darling, is it you? Come in here! The moment the Goddess heard you were coming, she started baking bread and boiling up two or three pots of split-pea soup. She roasted a whole ox over the coals and baked cakes and rolls. Come on in!

XANTHIAS [508] That's very kind. No, thank you.

MAID By Apollo, I'm not going to stand by and let you leave, not when she's stewed up some chicken too, and toasted nibbles, and mixed the sweetest wine. Come in with me.

XANTHIAS [512] Very nice of you.

MAID Don't be silly. I'm not letting you go. There's a gorgeous flute girl in there waiting for you, and two or three dancing girls besides.

XANTHIAS [515] What's that? Dancing girls?

MAID [516] Ripe young things, freshly plucked. Come in! The cook was just about to take the fish steaks off the fire, and the table was being brought in.

XANTHIAS [519] Go on, then. First of all, tell the dancing girls in there that I'm coming in personally. Boy! Follow me this way with the luggage.

38 Melite was an Athenian district with a famous shrine of Heracles; the jibe may be aimed at a well-known local.

DIONYSUS [522] Hold it, you! You're not taking this seriously, are you, just because I dressed you up as Heracles for a joke? Stop fooling around, Xanthias. Pick up the baggage and carry it again.

XANTHIAS [526] What's this? You're not thinking of taking back what you gave me yourself?

DIONYSUS [527] I'm not thinking about it, I'm doing it. Put down that skin.

XANTHIAS [528] I call witnesses to this! I leave it to the gods!

DIONYSUS [529] What gods? Wasn't it stupid and empty-headed of you to expect that you, a slave and a mortal, could be Alcmene's son?

XANTHIAS [532] Fine, fine. Have them. Maybe some day you'll need me, god willing.

CHORUS

[534] That's the way of a man
with brains and sense,
who's sailed the seas a lot:
always roll yourself across
to the side of the ship that's riding well,
rather than stand there like a painted
picture, stuck
in one pose. To swing round
to the comfier spot
is the mark of a clever man,
a born Theramenes.[39]

39 Theramenes, an Athenian politician notorious for changing sides; he was nicknamed "the Buskin," a boot that fits either foot.

DIONYSUS

541 Wouldn't it be a joke
if Xanthias, a slave,
sprawled back on Milesian
rugs, were kissing a dancing
girl, then called for a pot to piss in,
and I, watching him,
grabbed hold of my chickpea,
and he, being a rogue himself,
spotted it, and then
punched me on the jaw and knocked out
the front row of my chorus?[40]

INNKEEPER 549 Plathane, Plathane, come here! It's that crook who came into our inn once and gobbled up sixteen of our loaves.

PLATHANE 551 By Zeus, it's the very man!

XANTHIAS 552 Somebody's in for trouble.

INNKEEPER 553 And twenty helpings of stewed meat on top of that, at half an obol each.

XANTHIAS 554 Somebody's going to pay.

INNKEEPER 555 And all that garlic.

DIONYSUS You're talking nonsense, woman. You don't know what you're saying.

INNKEEPER 556 Oh, so you thought I wouldn't recognize you anymore, just because you're wearing those boots? And what else? I haven't even mentioned all that salt fish.

PLATHANE 559 No, by Zeus, or the fresh cheese, you poor thing, that he wolfed down baskets and all.

INNKEEPER 561 And then, when I asked for my money, he gave me a nasty look and started bellowing.

40 "Chickpea" is slang for the penis; "the front row of my chorus" means his front teeth.

XANTHIAS [563] That's him all over. That's how he behaves everywhere.

INNKEEPER [564] And he pulled out his sword, acting like a madman.

PLATHANE [565] By Zeus, he did, you poor dear!

INNKEEPER And we two were so terrified we jumped straight up onto the shelf, and he rushed out and was off, taking the mats with him.

XANTHIAS [568] That's him all over too.

PLATHANE Well, we have to do something.

INNKEEPER [569] Go on, call my patron Cleon for me.[41]

PLATHANE [570] And you, if you run into Hyperbolus, get him for me, so we can crush this man.

INNKEEPER [571] You disgusting gullet, how I'd love to take a rock and smash those molars you used to eat up my stock!

PLATHANE [574] And I'd love to throw you into the Pit.

INNKEEPER [575] And I'd love to take a sickle and cut out that throat you swallowed my sausages with.

PLATHANE [577] Well, I'm off to Cleon. He'll have a summons on you today and reel it all back out of you.

DIONYSUS [579] May I die horribly if I don't love Xanthias.

XANTHIAS [580] I know, I know what you're thinking. Stop, stop right there. I'm not going to be Heracles again.

DIONYSUS [581] Don't say that, Xanthias, dear.

XANTHIAS [582] And how could I be Alcmene's son, when I'm a slave and a mortal?

DIONYSUS [584] I know, I know you're angry, and you're right to be. Even if you hit me, I wouldn't say a word. But if I ever take it away from you again from now on, may I die horribly, root and

41 Cleon and Hyperbolus, popular leaders savaged in Aristophanes' earlier plays, were long dead by 405 BC, so in Hades they are on hand to help.

branch, me, my wife, my kids, and bleary-eyed Archedemus too.[42]

XANTHIAS 589 I accept the oath, and on those terms I'll take it.

CHORUS

590 Now it's your job, since
you've taken back the costume
you had at the start,
to make yourself young again ...
and glare fiercely once more,
remembering the god
you're playing.
But if you're caught babbling
and let slip anything soft,
you'll have to lift
the baggage again.

XANTHIAS

597 Not bad advice, gentlemen.
As it happens, I was just
thinking the same myself.
I know perfectly well
that if something good turns up
he'll try to take it all back.
But even so, I'll show
myself brave in spirit
with a glare as sharp as oregano.
And it looks like I'll need to: I hear
a noise at the door already.

AEACUS 605 Tie up this dog thief, quick, so he can pay for it. Hurry up, you two!

DIONYSUS 606 Somebody's in for trouble.

XANTHIAS 607 Go to hell! Don't you come near me!

42 "Bleary-eyed" was Archedemus' nickname; he led the prosecution of the generals after the battle of Arginusae.

AEACUS Oh, so you want a fight? Ditylas! Sceblyas! Pardocas! Get over here and fight this man.

DIONYSUS 610 Well, isn't that shocking, him hitting out, when he steals other people's property too?

AEACUS 611 Monstrous, more like.

DIONYSUS 612 Disgraceful, I'd say, and shocking.

XANTHIAS Look, by Zeus, if I've ever been here before, I'm willing to drop dead, or if I ever stole anything of yours worth so much as a hair. And I'll make you a really generous offer: take this slave of mine and torture him, and if you ever find I've done wrong, take me away and put me to death.[43]

AEACUS 618 And how shall I torture him?

XANTHIAS Every way there is. Tie him to a ladder, hang him up, whip him with a bristle whip, flay him, rack him, pour vinegar up his nose, pile bricks on him, everything else. Only don't beat him with a leek or a fresh spring onion.

AEACUS 623 That's fair. And if I maim your slave at all while beating him, you'll get compensation.

XANTHIAS 625 Not on my account. Just take him off and torture him.

AEACUS 626 No, right here, so he'll tell it to your face. You, put down the baggage, quick, and see you don't tell any lies here.

DIONYSUS 628 I hereby give notice: nobody is to torture me, because I'm immortal. Otherwise you'll have only yourself to blame.

AEACUS 630 What are you saying?

DIONYSUS 631 I say I'm immortal, Dionysus, son of Zeus, and this one's a slave.

AEACUS 632 Do you hear that?

43 Under Athenian law a slave's evidence counted only if taken under torture, and a master could offer his slave for questioning.

XANTHIAS I do. All the more reason to whip him: if he's a god, he won't feel it.

DIONYSUS 635 Well then, since you say you're a god too, why don't you take the same number of blows as me?

XANTHIAS 637 That's fair. And whichever of us you see crying first, or minding the beating at all, take it that he's not the god.

AEACUS 640 There's no doubt about it, you're a real gentleman: you go straight for what's fair. Strip, both of you.

XANTHIAS 642 So how will you torture us fairly?

AEACUS Easy. Blow for blow, each of you in turn.

XANTHIAS 643 Sounds good.

AEACUS 644 There!

XANTHIAS Now watch and see if I flinch.

AEACUS 645 I've already hit you.

XANTHIAS No, by Zeus, you haven't.

AEACUS It doesn't look like it, either. Well, I'll go over to this one and hit him.

DIONYSUS 646 When?

AEACUS 647 I've already hit you.

DIONYSUS Then how come I didn't sneeze?

AEACUS 648 I don't know. I'll try this one again.

XANTHIAS 649 Get on with it, won't you? Ow-ow-ow!

AEACUS Why "ow-ow-ow"? Did that hurt?

XANTHIAS 650 No, by Zeus, I was just thinking about when the festival of Heracles at Diomeia comes round.[44]

AEACUS 652 What a devout fellow! Back over here again.

DIONYSUS 653 Ooh! Ooh!

AEACUS What is it?

44 Diomeia was an Athenian district that held a lively festival of Heracles; Xanthias passes off his cry of pain as a cry of delight.

DIONYSUS I see cavalry!

AEACUS 654 Then why are you crying?

DIONYSUS I smell onions.

AEACUS 655 Because you don't mind it at all, of course.

DIONYSUS Doesn't bother me a bit.

AEACUS 656 Then I'd better go over to this one again.

XANTHIAS 657 Ow!

AEACUS What is it?

XANTHIAS Get this thorn out.

AEACUS 658 What's going on here? Back over this way again.

DIONYSUS 659 Apollo!—you who hold Delos, or Pytho somewhere...

XANTHIAS 660 That hurt him. Didn't you hear?

DIONYSUS Not me. I was just remembering a line of Hipponax's iambics.[45]

XANTHIAS 662 You're getting nowhere. Pound him in the flanks.

AEACUS 663 No, by Zeus. Right, now let's have your belly.

DIONYSUS 664 Poseidon...

XANTHIAS Somebody's hurting.

DIONYSUS 665 ...who rule the headlands of the Aegean, or the gray sea's depths![46]

AEACUS 668 By Demeter, I just can't work out which of you is the god. Go on in, both of you. My master will know you himself, and so will Persephone, since they're gods too.

DIONYSUS 672 You're right. Only I wish you'd thought of that before I took the beating.

45 Hipponax, a sixth-century BC poet famous for coarse and abusive iambic verse.
46 Dionysus turns his yell into a tragic quotation, from Sophocles' *Laocoon* according to ancient commentators.

PARABASIS

The chorus addresses the audience, urging amnesty for past offenders and a return to good, decent leaders.

CHORUS

675 Muse of the holy choruses, step forward and come
to delight in my song,
to look on the great throng of people where countless skills
sit in their seats,
more hungry for honor than Cleophon—
on whose babbling lips
a Thracian swallow
roars terribly,
perched on a foreign leaf;
she trills a nightingale's tearful dirge: that he'll be done for
even if the votes come out even.[47]

686 It's right for the sacred chorus to join in giving the city good advice and instruction. So first of all, we think the citizens should be put on an equal footing and their fears taken away. If anyone slipped up, tripped by Phrynichus' wrestling holds, I say those who stumbled then should be allowed to clear themselves of the charge and wipe out their earlier mistakes. Next, I say no one in the city should be stripped of his citizen rights. It's a disgrace that men who fought in one sea battle should become Plataeans overnight, masters instead of slaves. Not that I could call that anything but well done; no, I approve. It's the only sensible thing you've done.[48] 697 Besides that, these men, who like their fathers have fought many sea battles at your side and are your own kin, ought to be forgiven this one misfortune when they ask. Come, you who are by nature the wisest of men, let go

47 Cleophon, the leading popular politician, who opposed peace with Sparta; he was mocked as half-Thracian, and a tied vote normally meant acquittal.
48 Phrynichus led the oligarchic coup of 411 BC, and its supporters later lost their citizen rights; the slaves who rowed at Arginusae in 406 BC were freed and given citizenship, as the Plataeans once had been.

of your anger, and let's gladly make everyone who fights at sea with us our kinsmen, with full rights as citizens. But if we puff ourselves up and stand on our dignity over this, and at a time when our city lies in the arms of the waves, then some day later on we won't be thought to have shown much sense.

706 If I can see straight into the life and ways
of a man who has a beating coming,
he won't be long either, this ape who pesters us now,
little Cleigenes,
the worst bath-man of all who lord it
over fake-soda lye mixed with ash
and Cimolian clay,
he won't hang around long. Knowing this, he's no
man of peace, so he won't someday be stripped while
drunk,
walking without his stick.[49]

718 We've often thought the city treats its fine, upstanding citizens the same way it treats the old coinage and the new gold. Those coins are not counterfeit. They're the finest coins there are, by all accounts, the only ones properly struck and ringing true, everywhere among Greeks and non-Greeks alike. Yet we make no use of them, but use these rotten bits of bronze, struck yesterday or the day before with the worst stamp there is.[50] 727 And it's the same with citizens. The ones we know are well-born and self-controlled, just men, fine and upstanding, raised in wrestling schools and choruses and the art of the Muses, we kick around; while the brass ones, the foreigners, the redheads, scoundrels born of scoundrels, the latest arrivals, we use for everything, men the city once wouldn't lightly have used even as scapegoats. So now at least, you fools, change your ways and make use of the good men again. If you succeed, you'll get the credit; and if you come to grief, at least you'll be hanging from a

49 Cleigenes, a politician against peace, apparently a bath-house owner accused of selling adulterated soap; he carried a stick against muggers when out drinking.
50 Athens' old silver coinage was trusted everywhere; in the emergency of 406–405 BC the city issued gold coins and plated bronze ones.

decent tree, and whatever happens to you, wise men will think you suffered it with honor.[51]

FIRST EPISODE

Aeacus tells Xanthias that Aeschylus and Euripides are fighting over the chair of tragedy, with Dionysus as judge.

AEACUS [738] By Zeus the Savior, your master's a real gentleman.

XANTHIAS [739] How could he not be a gentleman? All he knows is drinking and fucking.

AEACUS [741] And not beating you after you'd been caught red-handed claiming to be the master when you were the slave!

XANTHIAS [743] He'd have been howling if he had.

AEACUS Now that's a proper slave's move you just made, the kind of thing I love doing.

XANTHIAS [745] You love it, really?

AEACUS Oh, yes. I feel like I've reached the top grade of the Mysteries when I curse my master behind his back.

XANTHIAS [747] And what about grumbling under your breath when you've had a good beating and you're heading out the door?

AEACUS [748] I enjoy that too.

XANTHIAS [749] And poking your nose into everything?

AEACUS By Zeus, there's nothing like it!

XANTHIAS [750] Zeus, god of our kin! And eavesdropping on whatever the masters are saying?

AEACUS [751] It drives me wild.

XANTHIAS [752] And blabbing it all to outsiders?

AEACUS Me? By Zeus, when I do that, I come all over myself.

XANTHIAS [754] Phoebus Apollo! Give me your right hand, let me kiss you, and you kiss me. And tell me, by Zeus, the god of all of

us who get whipped, what's all this racket in there, the shouting and the abuse?

AEACUS [758] Aeschylus and Euripides.

XANTHIAS [759] Ah.

AEACUS There's a business, a big business, got stirred up big among the dead, a whole lot of strife.

XANTHIAS [761] Over what?

AEACUS There's a law laid down here for all the arts that are great and clever: whoever's the best among his fellow artists gets free meals in the town hall and a chair next to Pluto—[52]

XANTHIAS [765] I see.

AEACUS [766] —until someone else came along who was more skilled in the art than he was. Then he had to make way.

XANTHIAS [768] So why has this got Aeschylus so worked up?

AEACUS [769] He held the chair of tragedy, as the best at the art.

XANTHIAS [770] And who has it now?

AEACUS [771] When Euripides came down, he started putting on shows for the muggers and purse-snatchers and father-beaters and housebreakers, and that's the crowd in Hades. And when they heard his counter-arguments and his twists and turns, they went crazy for him and decided he was the most skilled. Then he got puffed up and laid claim to the chair where Aeschylus sat.

XANTHIAS [778] And nobody threw stones at him?

AEACUS [779] No, by Zeus. The people clamored for a trial to decide which of them was more skilled in the art.

XANTHIAS [781] The people—that crowd of crooks?

AEACUS By Zeus, yes, to high heaven.

XANTHIAS [782] And didn't Aeschylus have any allies on his side?

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51 Scapegoats (pharmakoi) were worthless people driven out of a Greek city in a purification ritual.

52 In Athens, free meals in the Prytaneum, the town hall, were a high public honor.

AEACUS 783 Decent people are few and far between, just like here.

XANTHIAS 784 So what's Pluto planning to do?

AEACUS 785 Hold a contest, right away, a trial and test of their art.

XANTHIAS 786 Then how come Sophocles didn't lay claim to the chair too?

AEACUS 788 No, by Zeus, not him. When he came down, he kissed Aeschylus and clasped his right hand, and Aeschylus made room for him on the chair. And now, as Cleidemides said, he was going to sit by as the reserve: if Aeschylus wins, he'll stay where he is; if not, he said, he'd fight it out with Euripides over the art.[53]

XANTHIAS 795 So it's really going to happen?

AEACUS By Zeus, yes, any minute now. And that's when the terrible stuff will get going. The art of the Muses will be weighed on the scales—

XANTHIAS 798 What? They're going to weigh out tragedy like a sacrificial lamb?

AEACUS 799 They'll bring out rulers and yardsticks for words, and folding frames—

XANTHIAS 800 What, are they making bricks?

AEACUS 801 —and set squares and wedges. Euripides says he's going to put the tragedies to the torture, word by word.

XANTHIAS 803 I imagine Aeschylus is taking that pretty hard.

AEACUS 804 Well, he lowered his head and glared like a bull.

XANTHIAS 805 And who's going to judge all this?

AEACUS That was the tricky part. The two of them found skilled men in short supply. Aeschylus didn't get on with the Athenians —

53 The "reserve" was the wrestler who sat out a bout to take on the winner; Cleidemides was probably an actor in Sophocles' plays.

XANTHIAS [808] Maybe he thought a lot of them were housebreakers.

AEACUS [809] —and he thought everyone else was rubbish when it came to judging poets' talents. So they handed it over to your master, since he knows the art. But let's go in. When our masters get serious, it means tears for us.

FIRST CHORAL SONG

The chorus imagines the coming clash between the thundering Aeschylus and the sharp-tongued Euripides.

CHORUS

814 Terrible, surely, the rage that will rise in the thunderer's heart
when he sees his rival, the sharp-tongued one,
whetting his tusk; and then, in a terrible frenzy,
his eyes will roll.[54]

818 There will be helmet-flashing battles of horse-plumed words,
splintering axles and shavings of fine-chiseled work,
as the man who carpenters minds fights to fend off
phrases that ride on horseback.

822 Bristling the shaggy mane on his natural crest,
knitting a terrible brow, he will roar and hurl
words bolted together, ripping them off like planks
with the blast of an earthborn giant.

826 Then the mouth-crafting tongue, smooth tester of verses,
uncoiling itself, shaking the reins of envy,
will split up his phrases and chop into tiny arguments
all that huge labor of lungs.

54 The chorus parodies grand epic style: the "thunderer" is Aeschylus, the sharp-tongued rival Euripides.

SECOND LYRIC SCENE

The two poets trade insults, and Dionysus has them pray before the contest begins.

EURIPIDES 830 I won't give up the chair, so don't lecture me. I say I'm better at the art than he is.

DIONYSUS 832 Aeschylus, why are you silent? You can hear what he's saying.

EURIPIDES 833 He'll start by putting on his grand, aloof act—the same trick he used to pull every time in his tragedies to amaze people.

DIONYSUS 835 My good man, don't talk too big.

EURIPIDES 836 I know this man. I've had him figured out for ages: a maker of wild men, stubborn-mouthed, with a mouth that has no bridle, no control, no gate; a man nobody can out-talk, a bundler of bombast.

AESCHYLUS 840 Is that so, son of the goddess of the vegetable patch? You say this to me, you collector of chit-chat, you maker of beggars, you stitcher of rags? You won't get away with saying it.[55]

DIONYSUS 843 Stop, Aeschylus, and do not let wrath inflame your heart with rancor.

AESCHYLUS 845 No, not until I've shown him up plainly for what he is, this maker of lame heroes, for all his swagger.

DIONYSUS 847 A lamb, a black lamb, boys, bring it out! There's a hurricane getting ready to break.[56]

AESCHYLUS 849 You who scrape together Cretan solos and bring unholy marriages into the art![57]

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55 Euripides' mother was mocked in comedy as a vegetable-seller, and his heroes for appearing in beggars' rags.
56 Black victims were sacrificed to avert storms; the Greek τυφώς is both a hurricane and the storm-monster Typhon.
57 Euripides wrote a *Cretans* and was known for lyric solos; "unholy marriages" points to plots like the incest in his *Aeolus*.

DIONYSUS 851 Hold it right there, most honored Aeschylus. And you, Euripides, you rogue, get yourself out of range of the hailstones if you've got any sense, or in his rage he'll hit you on the temple with a capital phrase and knock your Telephus out of your skull. And you, Aeschylus, not in anger: test him and be tested calmly. It isn't proper for poets to trade abuse like breadsellers in the market. But you go straight off roaring like a holm oak on fire.[58]

EURIPIDES 860 I'm ready, myself, and I'm not backing out: I'll bite and be bitten first, if he likes—my verses, my lyrics, the very sinews of tragedy, yes, by Zeus, my *Peleus* and my *Aeolus* and my *Meleager*, and above all my *Telephus*.[59]

DIONYSUS 865 And you, what do you want to do? Speak, Aeschylus.

AESCHYLUS 866 I'd rather not have competed here. The contest between us isn't on equal terms.

DIONYSUS 867 Why not?

AESCHYLUS 868 Because my poetry didn't die with me, but his died with him, so he'll have it all on hand to recite. Still, since you think so, it has to be done.[60]

DIONYSUS 871 Come on then, somebody give me incense here, and fire, so I can pray, before all this cleverness starts, that I judge this contest in the truest spirit of the Muses. And you, sing the Muses a song.

58 *Telephus* was Euripides' notorious play whose hero, a king, appears disguised in beggar's rags.
59 *Peleus, Aeolus* and *Meleager* were also plays by Euripides, now lost.
60 Aeschylus' plays had the unusual privilege of being restaged in Athens after his death.

CHORUS

Daughters of Zeus, nine maidens pure,
Muses, who look down on the subtle and clever minds
of men who mint maxims, whenever they come to a quarrel
and argue with sharp-witted, twisting wrestling holds,
come and watch the power
of two most formidable mouths to supply
phrases and sawn-off scraps of verse.
For now the great contest of skill gets down to work at last.

DIONYSUS Now you two pray as well, before you recite your verses.

AESCHYLUS Demeter, who nourished my mind, make me worthy of your mysteries.[61]

DIONYSUS You take some incense too and put it on.

EURIPIDES No, thank you. The gods I pray to are different ones.

DIONYSUS Private ones of your own? A new coinage?

EURIPIDES Very much so.

DIONYSUS Go on, then, pray to your private gods.

EURIPIDES Aether, my pasture, and Pivot of the Tongue, and Intelligence, and Nostrils keen to scent: grant that I rightly refute whatever arguments I get hold of.[62]

61 Aeschylus came from Eleusis, home of Demeter's Mysteries.
62 These "gods" mock the new science and sophistry; in *Clouds* Aristophanes has Socrates pray to Air and Aether as well.

AGON

Euripides mocks Aeschylus' bombast; Aeschylus says poets must make citizens better, and Euripides made them worse.

CHORUS

895 And we are eager
to hear from two skilled men
what melody of words
you'll bring along the road of battle.
Their tongues have turned savage,
neither of them lacks nerve,
and neither mind is slow to move.
So we can expect
that one will say something smart
and filed down fine,
while the other, ripping words up
roots and all,
will fall on him and scatter
a whole dust-wallow of verses.

DIONYSUS 905 Well, you need to speak as quickly as you can. But make sure what you say is smart—no similes, and nothing anyone else would say.

EURIPIDES 907 Well now, what sort of poet I am myself I'll tell you at the very end. First I'll show up this man for the charlatan and fraud he was, and the tricks he used to cheat his audiences—fools he took over after Phrynichus had raised them. First of all he'd sit some single figure down, all wrapped up—an Achilles, say, or a Niobe—without showing the face, as window-dressing for the tragedy, and they didn't make a peep, not even this much.[63]

DIONYSUS 914 No, by Zeus, they didn't.

63 Phrynichus was an early tragic poet (active c. 510–476 BC); Achilles and Niobe sat veiled and silent in Aeschylus' lost *Myrmidons* and *Niobe*.

EURIPIDES And the chorus would pound out strings of songs, four in a row, one after another, while the characters stayed silent.

DIONYSUS 916 And I enjoyed the silence. It gave me as much pleasure as the chatterers do now.

EURIPIDES 917 That's because you were simple-minded, believe me.

DIONYSUS 918 I think so too. But why did what's-his-name do it?

EURIPIDES 919 Pretentiousness. So the spectator would sit there waiting for the moment when Niobe would say something. And meanwhile the play would be running on.

DIONYSUS 921 What a total scoundrel! So that's how he was conning me. —What are you squirming and fretting for?

EURIPIDES 922 Because I'm showing him up. And then, after he'd done all this nonsense and the play was already half over, he'd say a dozen words as big as oxen, with eyebrows and crests on them, fearsome bogey-faced things nobody in the audience had ever heard of.

AESCHYLUS 926 Oh, misery!

DIONYSUS Be quiet.

EURIPIDES 927 And he'd never say a single clear thing—

DIONYSUS Don't grind your teeth.

EURIPIDES 928 —but it was all Scamanders, or trenches, or bronze-beaten griffin-eagles on shields, and words as steep as cavalry cliffs, which weren't easy to make sense of.

DIONYSUS 930 By the gods, I for one once lay awake a long stretch of the night trying to work out what sort of bird the tawny horse-rooster was.[64]

AESCHYLUS 933 It was an emblem painted on ships, you complete ignoramus!

64 "Tawny horse-rooster" is a phrase from Aeschylus' *Myrmidons*.

DIONYSUS 934 And I thought it was Eryxis, son of Philoxenus.[65]

EURIPIDES 935 So you had to put a rooster into tragedy too?

AESCHYLUS 936 And you, you enemy of the gods, what sort of things did you make?

EURIPIDES 937 Not horse-roosters, by Zeus, or goat-stags like you, the kind they paint on Persian tapestries. No: when I first took over the art from you, all bloated with bombast and heavy words, the very first thing I did was slim it down and take off the weight with little verses and walks and white beets, giving it a juice of chit-chat strained out of books. Then I built it up again on solos—[66]

DIONYSUS 944 —with a dose of Cephisophon mixed in.[67]

EURIPIDES 945 Then I didn't babble whatever came into my head, or plunge in and make a mess. No, the first character to come out would right away give me the play's whole pedigree—

DIONYSUS 947 Well, by Zeus, it was a better one than your own.[68]

EURIPIDES 948 Then from the opening lines on I'd leave nobody idle. The wife would speak, and the slave just as much, and the master and the young girl and the old woman.

AESCHYLUS 950 Well then, shouldn't you have been put to death for daring that?

EURIPIDES 951 No, by Apollo. I was doing something democratic.

DIONYSUS 952 Leave that one alone, my friend. When it comes to that subject, it's not the best walk for you to take.[69]

EURIPIDES 954 Then I taught these people to talk—

65 Eryxis is otherwise unknown; presumably he was mocked for his looks or his strutting.
66 Euripides describes his reform as a doctor's regimen: a slimming diet, exercise ("walks"), and purges.
67 Cephisophon, a member of Euripides' household, was said to help write his plays (and to sleep with his wife).
68 Comedy regularly sneered at Euripides' humble family.
69 Probably a dig at Euripides' last years at the court of the Macedonian king.

AESCHYLUS I'll say you did. And I wish you'd burst down the middle before you taught them!

EURIPIDES 956 —to apply subtle rules and set square to verses, to think, see, understand, twist, love, contrive, suspect the worst, think round everything—

AESCHYLUS 958 I'll say you did.

EURIPIDES 959 —bringing in everyday things, things we use, things we live with, where I could be shown up, since these people knew them and could criticize my art. But I didn't blow hot air, dragging them away from good sense, and I didn't stun them with Cycnuses and Memnons riding horses with bells on their bridles. You'll recognize his disciples and mine. His are Phormisius and Megaenetus the oaf, trumpet-lance-beards, flesh-ripping pine-benders. Mine are Cleitophon and Theramenes the smart.[70]

DIONYSUS 968 Theramenes? A smart man, and clever at everything. If he ever falls into trouble and it's right on top of him, he's fallen clear of the trouble: no losing Chian, he, but a lucky Ceian.[71]

EURIPIDES 971 That's the kind of thinking I introduced to these people, putting reasoning and inquiry into my art, so that now they understand everything and see through it all—and, in particular, run their households better than before and look into things: "How's this doing?" "Where's that thing of mine?" "Who took this?"

DIONYSUS 980 By the gods, yes: now every Athenian who walks into his house yells at the slaves and demands, "Where's the pot?" "Who's bitten the head off the sprat?" "The bowl I had last year is dead on me." "Where's yesterday's garlic?" "Who's been

70 Phormisius (famous for his shaggy beard) and Megaenetus were bluff Athenian public figures; Cleitophon and Theramenes were politicians of the new clever style.

71 In dice the "Chian" was the losing throw and the "Coan" the winning one; Theramenes came from Ceos, so Aristophanes turns "Coan" into "Ceian."

nibbling the olive?" Whereas before they sat there like perfect idiots, gaping Mammacythuses, Melitideses.[72]

CHORUS

"You see this, shining Achilles":
but you, come, what will you say to this?
Only take care
your temper doesn't seize you
and carry you off past the olive trees;
he has made terrible charges.
So, noble sir, take care
you don't answer in a rage:
reef in your sails
and use only their edges,
then little by little bring her on
and keep watch
until you catch a wind
that's smooth and steady.[73]

DIONYSUS Come on, you who first of all the Greeks built towering words of grandeur and dressed up tragic drivel: have courage and open the tap!

AESCHYLUS I'm angry at the way things have turned out, and my guts are indignant that I have to argue against this man. But so he can't claim I'm at a loss, answer me: what should a poet be admired for?

EURIPIDES For cleverness and good advice, because we make people better in their cities.

AESCHYLUS Then if you haven't done that, but have taken good, noble men and turned them into utter wretches, what will you say you deserve to suffer?

DIONYSUS Death. Don't ask him.

AESCHYLUS Well then, look at the kind of men he got from me to begin with: noble, six feet tall, not dodgers of their civic

72 Mammacythus and Melitides were proverbial simpletons.

duty, not market-loafers or tricksters like today's, or rogues, but men breathing spears and lances and white-plumed helmets and casques and greaves and hearts of sevenfold oxhide.

DIONYSUS 1018 Here comes the trouble now. He'll wear me out with his helmet-making again.

EURIPIDES 1019 And what did you do to teach them to be so noble?

DIONYSUS 1020 Tell him, Aeschylus, and don't be so stubbornly proud and touchy.

AESCHYLUS 1021 I wrote a play full of Ares.

DIONYSUS Which?

AESCHYLUS *Seven Against Thebes*. Every man who saw it longed to be a warrior.

DIONYSUS 1023 That was a bad thing you did there: you made the Thebans braver in war. You deserve a beating for that.[74]

AESCHYLUS 1025 But you could all have trained for it yourselves; you just didn't turn your minds to it. Then after that I put on *Persians* and taught them always to long to beat their enemies, glorifying a superb achievement.[75]

DIONYSUS 1028 I certainly loved it when I heard about dead Darius, and the chorus at once clapped their hands together like this and cried "iauoi!"[76]

AESCHYLUS 1030 That's what poets ought to work at. Look how useful the noble poets have been from the very beginning. Orpheus taught us rites and to keep from killing; Musaeus taught cures for diseases and oracles; Hesiod the working of the land, the seasons for crops, plowing. And the divine Homer—

73 The opening quotes Aeschylus' *Myrmidons*; olive trees marked the turning point of the racecourse.
74 Thebes was one of Athens' enemies in the Peloponnesian War.
75 *Persians* (472 BC) celebrates the Athenian victory over the Persian fleet at Salamis.
76 The Greek line is corrupt; in *Persians* the ghost of the dead king Darius is summoned by the lamenting chorus.

where did he get his honor and fame if not from teaching useful things: battle formations, feats of excellence, the arming of men?[77]

DIONYSUS 1036 And yet he didn't teach Pantacles, at any rate, the clumsiest man alive. Just the other day, when he was marching in the procession, he'd strapped his helmet on first and was about to fasten the crest on afterward.[78]

AESCHYLUS 1039 But he taught plenty of other good men, I tell you, including Lamachus the hero. My mind took its imprint from him and created many excellences—Patrocluses, lion-hearted Teucers—to rouse the citizen to measure himself against them whenever he heard the trumpet. But no, by Zeus, I didn't create lustful women like Phaedra or Stheneboea, and nobody knows of any woman in love I ever created.[79]

EURIPIDES 1045 No, by Zeus, there wasn't a bit of Aphrodite in you. And may there never be!

AESCHYLUS 1046 Whereas on you and yours she sat heavy, very heavy—so heavy she knocked you yourself flat.[80]

DIONYSUS 1047 By Zeus, that's certainly true. What you wrote about other men's wives, you got hit with yourself.

EURIPIDES 1049 And how, you wretch, do my Stheneboeas harm the city?

AESCHYLUS 1050 Because you induced noble women, wives of noble men, to drink hemlock out of shame on account of your Bellerophons.

EURIPIDES 1052 So this story I composed about Phaedra wasn't true, then?

AESCHYLUS 1053 No, by Zeus, it was true. But a poet ought to hide what's wicked, not bring it on stage and teach it. Little chil-

77 Musaeus was a legendary poet and seer, linked like Orpheus with mystery cults.
78 Pantacles, an Athenian mocked for his clumsiness.
79 Lamachus was an Athenian general killed in Sicily in 414 BC; Phaedra and Stheneboea are Euripidean wives who lust after young men.

dren have a schoolmaster to tell them things; grown men have poets. We absolutely must say what's good for them.

EURIPIDES 1056 So when you talk to us about Lycabettuses and things the size of Parnassus, is that teaching what's good? You ought to talk like a human being.[81]

AESCHYLUS 1058 But, you poor devil, great thoughts and ideas necessarily give birth to words of the same size. Besides, it's fitting for demigods to use bigger words; after all, they wear far grander clothes than we do. I set a good example, and you ruined it.

EURIPIDES 1062 By doing what?

AESCHYLUS 1063 First, by dressing kings in rags, so they'd look pitiful to people.

EURIPIDES 1064 And what harm did I do by that?

AESCHYLUS 1065 Well, because of it no rich man is willing to serve as a trierarch. He wraps himself up in rags and whines and says he's poor.[82]

DIONYSUS 1067 Yes, by Demeter, with a tunic of thick wool on underneath. And if he gets away with that story, up he pops at the fish stalls.

AESCHYLUS 1069 Then you taught them to cultivate chatter and glib talk, which emptied the wrestling schools and wore down the butts of the young men sitting around chattering, and persuaded the crew of the *Paralus* to talk back to their officers. Yet back when I was alive, all they knew how to do was call for their barley cake and shout "rhyppapai!"[83]

DIONYSUS 1074 Yes, by Apollo, and fart in the face of the rower below, and smear shit on their messmate, and go ashore and

80 Gossip held that Euripides' wife was unfaithful to him.
81 Lycabettus is a hill in Athens; Parnassus a great mountain above Delphi.
82 Wealthy Athenians were required to fund and command a warship for a year, a duty called the trierarchy.
83 The *Paralus* was a state warship crewed by citizens known for their fierce democratic views; "rhyppapai" was a rowers' chant.

mug somebody. Now he talks back, and doesn't row anymore, just sails this way and then back again.[84]

AESCHYLUS 1078 What evils isn't he to blame for? Didn't he put on stage women who act as go-betweens, and women giving birth in temples, and sleeping with their brothers, and saying that life isn't life? And because of this our city has filled up with undersecretaries and buffoon monkeys of the people, forever deceiving the people—and nobody can carry a torch anymore, they're so out of training.[85]

DIONYSUS 1089 No, by Zeus, they can't. I nearly dried up laughing at the Panathenaea, when some slow fellow was running, bent over, pale, fat, falling behind, and making a terrible job of it. And then the Potters' Quarter men at the gates slapped him on the belly, ribs, flanks, butt, and as they beat him with their flat palms, he let out a little fart, and, blowing on his torch, ran off.[86]

84 Rowers on the lowest tier of a trireme sat right below the seats of the men above them.

85 All allusions to Euripides: the Nurse in *Hippolytus*, Auge in *Auge*, Canace in *Aeolus*, and a famous line from his *Polyidus*.

86 At the torch race of the Panathenaea festival, spectators in the Potters' Quarter (Ceramicus) slapped runners who lagged behind.

SECOND CHORAL SONG

The chorus urges the poets to argue boldly, assuring them the audience is clever enough to follow.

CHORUS

Big the issue, fierce the quarrel, mighty the war that's coming on.
So it's a hard job to decide,
when one of them pulls with violence
and the other can wheel around
and push back sharply.
But don't both stay sitting in one place:
there are plenty of other lines of attack, and clever ones.
Whatever you have to quarrel about,
speak, charge, flay
the old things and the new,
and take the risk of saying something subtle and skilled.

And if you're afraid of this, that there may be some ignorance
among the spectators, so that
they won't catch the subtleties of what you say,
don't worry about that at all: it's not like that anymore.
They're veterans,
and every one of them has a book and is learning the clever stuff.
Their natures are superb anyway,
and now they've been sharpened too.
So don't be afraid at all, but
go through everything, since, as far as the audience goes, they're wise.

THIRD LYRIC SCENE

The poets attack each other's prologues and lyrics, weigh their verses, and Dionysus chooses Aeschylus.

EURIPIDES 1119 All right, now I'll turn to your prologues themselves. That's the first part of a tragedy, so that's where I'll test this clever man first. He was unclear in setting out the facts.

DIONYSUS 1123 And which one of his will you test?

EURIPIDES Lots of them. But first recite me the one from the *Oresteia*.

DIONYSUS 1125 Come on, then, silence, everybody. Speak, Aeschylus.

AESCHYLUS 1126 "Hermes of the underworld, you who watch over a father's powers, be my savior and my ally, I beg you. For I have come to this land, and I return."[87]

DIONYSUS 1129 Can you find anything to fault there?

EURIPIDES More than a dozen things.

DIONYSUS 1130 But that's only three lines altogether.

EURIPIDES 1131 And each one has twenty mistakes in it.

DIONYSUS 1132 Aeschylus, I advise you to keep quiet. Otherwise you'll turn out to owe a lot more than three lines of iambics.

AESCHYLUS 1134 Me, keep quiet for him?

DIONYSUS If you take my advice, yes.

EURIPIDES 1135 Because right off the bat he's made a mistake as big as the sky.

AESCHYLUS 1136 You see what drivel you're talking?

DIONYSUS I couldn't care less.

AESCHYLUS 1137 How do you say I made a mistake?

EURIPIDES Say it again from the beginning.

87 The opening lines of Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, the second play of the *Oresteia*, spoken by Orestes at his murdered father's tomb.

AESCHYLUS 1138 "Hermes of the underworld, you who watch over a father's powers."

EURIPIDES 1139 Now, isn't it Orestes who says this, at the tomb of his dead father?

AESCHYLUS 1140 That's exactly what I'm saying.

EURIPIDES 1141 So what does he mean? His father was killed violently at a woman's hand, by secret treachery, and Hermes "watched over" that?

AESCHYLUS 1144 Of course not. It's Hermes the Helper he's addressing as the god of the underworld, and he makes it clear by saying that Hermes holds this office as a privilege from his father—

EURIPIDES 1147 That's an even bigger mistake than I was hoping for. Because if he holds his underworld office from his father—

DIONYSUS 1149 Then he'd be a grave robber on his father's side.

AESCHYLUS 1150 Dionysus, the wine you're drinking has no bouquet.

DIONYSUS 1151 Recite him the next one. And you, keep an eye out for the damage.

AESCHYLUS 1152 "Be my savior and my ally, I beg you. For I have come to this land, and I return—"

EURIPIDES 1154 The wise Aeschylus has told us the same thing twice.

DIONYSUS 1155 Twice how?

EURIPIDES Look at the wording, and I'll explain it to you. "For I have come to this land," he says, "and I return." But "I have come" is the same thing as "I return."

DIONYSUS 1158 By Zeus, yes! It's as if someone said to his neighbor, "Lend me a kneading bowl, or if you'd rather, a bowl for kneading."

AESCHYLUS 1160 No, it's not the same thing at all, you chattered-out windbag. That line is as good as a line can be.

EURIPIDES 1162 How so? Go on, explain to me what exactly you mean.

AESCHYLUS 1163 Anybody who has a share in his country can "come" to it. He's come, and nothing more to it. But a man in exile both "comes" and "returns."

DIONYSUS 1166 Good one, by Apollo! What do you say to that, Euripides?

EURIPIDES 1167 I say Orestes didn't "return" home. He came in secret, without the authorities' permission.

DIONYSUS 1169 Good one, by Hermes! Though I don't understand what you're saying.

EURIPIDES 1170 Well then, carry on with the next one.

DIONYSUS Go on, Aeschylus, carry on, hurry up. And you, watch out for the bad bit.

AESCHYLUS 1172 "Upon this mound of the tomb I call upon my father to hear, to hearken."

EURIPIDES 1173 There he goes again, saying the same thing twice: "to hear, to hearken." They're obviously the same.

DIONYSUS 1175 He was talking to the dead, you pest. You can't get through to them even if you say it three times.

AESCHYLUS 1177 And how did you write your prologues?

EURIPIDES I'll tell you. And if I say the same thing twice anywhere, or you see any padding in it that isn't doing a job, spit on me.

DIONYSUS 1180 Go on, then, recite. I've no choice but to hear how perfectly correct the words of your prologues are.

EURIPIDES 1182 "At first, Oedipus was a happy man"—[88]

AESCHYLUS 1183 No, by Zeus, he certainly wasn't! He was unhappy by birth. Before he was even born, Apollo said he

88 The opening of Euripides' lost *Antigone*.

would kill his father—before he even existed! How was he "at first a happy man"?

EURIPIDES 1187 "Then later he became the most wretched of mortals."

AESCHYLUS 1188 No, by Zeus, he certainly didn't! He never stopped being that. How could he? First, as soon as he was born, they put him out in a pot in the middle of winter, so that he wouldn't grow up and murder his father. Then he hobbled off to Polybus with both feet swollen. Then, young as he was, he married an old woman, and on top of that she was his own mother. Then he blinded himself.

DIONYSUS 1195 So he was happy—provided he'd also served as a general with Erasinides.[89]

EURIPIDES 1197 Drivel. I write fine prologues.

AESCHYLUS 1198 Well, by Zeus, I'm not going to nibble at every word of yours line by line. With the gods' help, I'll destroy your prologues with a little oil flask.

EURIPIDES 1201 With a little oil flask? You, destroy mine?

AESCHYLUS Just one. The way you write, anything fits into your iambics: a little fleece, a little oil flask, a little sack. I'll show you right now.

EURIPIDES 1205 Oh, really? You'll show me?

AESCHYLUS I will.

DIONYSUS All right, then, you have to recite.

EURIPIDES 1206 "Aegyptus, as the most widely sown tale tells, with his fifty sons, by the oar of seafaring, putting in at Argos _"[90]

89 Erasinides was one of the generals who won the sea battle of Arginusae in 406 BC and were then executed by the Athenians for failing to rescue the shipwrecked.
90 From the opening of Euripides' lost *Archelaus*.

AESCHYLUS 1208 lost his little oil flask.[91]

DIONYSUS 1209 What was that "little oil flask"? Damn him! Recite him another prologue, so I can see it again.

EURIPIDES 1211 "Dionysus, who, with thyrsus and with skins of fawns arrayed, amid the pine torches down Parnassus leaps in the dance—"[92]

AESCHYLUS 1213 lost his little oil flask.

DIONYSUS 1214 Oh no, we've been hit by the oil flask again!

EURIPIDES 1215 It won't be a problem. To this prologue he won't be able to attach an oil flask. "There is no man who is happy in all things: either he is nobly born and has no livelihood, or being of low birth—"[93]

AESCHYLUS 1219 lost his little oil flask.

DIONYSUS 1220 Euripides—

EURIPIDES What is it?

DIONYSUS I think you'd better take in your sail. This little oil flask is going to blow a gale.

EURIPIDES 1222 By Demeter, I couldn't care less. This time it'll be knocked right out of his hands.

DIONYSUS 1224 Go on, then, recite another one—and keep away from the oil flask.

EURIPIDES 1225 "Cadmus, once, departing from the city of Sidon, Agenor's son—"[94]

AESCHYLUS 1226 lost his little oil flask.

DIONYSUS 1227 My dear fellow, buy the oil flask off him, so he doesn't grind our prologues to pieces.

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91 The phrase fits neatly into the second half of a Euripidean iambic line after its usual pause, so Aeschylus can tack it onto any of these openings; the little flask may also carry a crude double meaning.
92 From Euripides' lost *Hypsipyle* (or possibly his *Archelaus*).
93 The opening of Euripides' lost *Stheneboea*.
94 From the opening of Euripides' lost *Phrixus*.

EURIPIDES 1228 What? Me, buy it from him?

DIONYSUS 1229 If you take my advice, yes.

EURIPIDES 1230 No way. I've got plenty of prologues I can recite where he won't be able to attach an oil flask. "Pelops, the son of Tantalus, to Pisa coming with swift horses—"[95]

AESCHYLUS 1233 lost his little oil flask.

DIONYSUS 1234 See? He's attached the oil flask again. My good man, even now, pay him for it at any price. You'll get a really fine one for an obol.

EURIPIDES 1237 No, by Zeus, not yet. I've still got lots left. "Oeneus, once, from the land—"

AESCHYLUS 1238 lost his little oil flask.

EURIPIDES 1239 Let me say the whole line first! "Oeneus, once, from the land reaping a harvest of many measures, offering the first fruits—"[96]

AESCHYLUS 1241 lost his little oil flask.

DIONYSUS 1242 In the middle of the sacrifice? And who swiped it?

EURIPIDES 1243 Leave him alone, my friend. Let him try it on this one. "Zeus, as has been told by truth itself—"[97]

DIONYSUS 1245 He'll finish you. He'll say, "lost his little oil flask." That little oil flask grows on your prologues like styes on the eyes. For gods' sake, turn to his lyrics instead.

EURIPIDES 1249 All right, I've got material to prove he's a bad lyric poet who keeps writing the same thing over and over.

95 The opening of Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*.
96 The opening of Euripides' lost *Meleager*.
97 The opening of Euripides' lost *Melanippe the Wise*.

CHORUS

1251 Whatever is going to happen?
I can't help wondering
what fault he'll find
with the man who wrote
by far the most lyrics, and the finest,
of anyone to this day.
I wonder how he can ever
find fault with him,
the lord of Bacchic song,
and I'm afraid for him.

EURIPIDES 1261 Truly marvelous lyrics! That'll soon be clear. I'll chop all his lyrics down into one.

DIONYSUS 1263 All right, I'll take some of these pebbles and keep count.

EURIPIDES

1264 Phthian Achilles, why, when you hear the man-slaying—
iē!—pounding, do you not come to the rescue?
Hermes we honor as our forefather, we the people of the lake.
Iē, the pounding! Do you not come to the rescue?[98]

DIONYSUS 1268 That's two poundings for you, Aeschylus.

EURIPIDES 1270 Most glorious of the Achaeans, wide-ruling son of Atreus, learn from me. / Iē, the pounding! Do you not come to the rescue?[99]

DIONYSUS 1272 That's pounding number three for you, Aeschylus.

98 A patchwork of lines from Aeschylus' lost *Myrmidons* and *Soul-Raisers*, with the refrain tacked on; *kopos* means both the pounding of breasts in mourning and exhaustion.
99 Probably from Aeschylus' lost *Telephus*.

EURIPIDES

1274 Hush, keep holy silence! The bee-keeping priestesses are at hand to open the house of Artemis.
Iē, the pounding! Do you not come to the rescue?
I have the right to proclaim the auspicious power of the men on the road.
Iē, the pounding! Do you not come to the rescue?[100]

DIONYSUS 1278 Zeus almighty, what a load of poundings! I want to go to the bathhouse. With all this pounding my kidneys are swelling up.

EURIPIDES 1281 Not before you've heard another set of his lyrics, these made out of the melodies he sings to the lyre.

DIONYSUS 1283 Go on, then, get on with it—and don't add any pounding.

EURIPIDES

1285 How the twin-throned might of the Achaeans, the flower of Hellas—
tophlattothrat tophlattothrat—
sends the Sphinx, the hound that presides over days of doom—
tophlattothrat tophlattothrat—
with spear and avenging hand, the bird of onslaught—
tophlattothrat tophlattothrat—
granting it to meet the reckless hounds that roam the air—
tophlattothrat tophlattothrat—
and the leaning toward Ajax—
tophlattothrat tophlattothrat.[101]

DIONYSUS 1296 What's this "phlattothrat"? Did you collect these rope-twisters' songs at Marathon, or where?

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100 The first line comes from Aeschylus' lost *Priestesses*, the third from his *Agamemnon* (104).
101 Scraps of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (108–111), his lost *Sphinx* and *Thracian Women*, stitched together with "tophlattothrat," a nonsense imitation of lyre-strumming.

AESCHYLUS 1298 Well, I took them from a fine source and put them to fine use, so that nobody would see me picking flowers in the same holy meadow of the Muses as Phrynichus. But this man takes from everywhere: from cheap prostitutes' ditties, from Meletus' drinking songs, from Carian pipe tunes, from dirges, from dance songs. That'll soon be clear. Somebody bring me the lyre. And yet what do we need a lyre for, with this stuff? Where's that girl who clicks the castanets? Come here, Muse of Euripides, you're just the right accompanist for these songs.[102]

DIONYSUS 1308 This Muse never sucked anybody off Lesbos-style. Oh no, not her.[103]

AESCHYLUS

1309 Halcyons, who by the ever-flowing waves of the sea
chatter on,
wetting your wings' skin
with the damp drops, bedewed;
and you, in corners under the roof,
spiders, who whi-i-i-irl with your fingers
the loom-laboring threads of the spindle,
care of the singing shuttle,
where the pipe-loving dolphin leapt
by the dark-beaked prows,
oracles and racecourses,
gleam of the vine's wine-flower,
tendril of the grape that ends all toil.
Throw your arms around me, child.
Do you see this foot?[104]

DIONYSUS 1323 I see it.

AESCHYLUS 1324 What, then? Do you see this one?

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102 Meletus was a poet of drinking songs; Caria, in Asia Minor, was known for its mournful pipe music.

103 "To act like a woman of Lesbos" was Greek slang for fellatio; Lesbos was also the home of lyric song.

104 A parody of Euripides' lyrics, strung together from bits of several plays with his drawn-out notes; the "foot" is a metrical one, which Aeschylus says limps.

DIONYSUS I see it.

AESCHYLUS

And you write stuff like this,
and dare to criticize my lyrics,
you who compose your songs
in the style of Cyrene's twelve positions?
So much for your lyrics. But I want to go on and run
through the style of your solo arias.
Dark-gleaming gloom
of night, what
wretched dream
do you send me from the unseen,
Hades' messenger,
with a soul that is soulless,
child of black Night,
a shuddering, dreadful sight,
clad-in-black-corpse-robes,
glaring murder, murder,
with great talons?
Come, my maids, light me a lamp,
and draw dew from the rivers in pitchers, and heat water,
so I may wash away the god-sent dream.
Io, god of the sea,
this is it! Io, my housemates,
behold these portents:
Glyce has snatched my rooster
and gone.[105]

105 Cyrene was a famous courtesan, said to know twelve positions.

1344 Nymphs born in the mountains!
Mania, grab her!
And I, poor wretch, happened to be minding
my own work,
a spindle full of flax
whi-i-i-irling in my hands,
making thread, so that
before dawn I might take it to market
and sell it.
But he flew up, flew up into the air
on the lightest tips of his wings,
and left me griefs, griefs,
and tears, tears from my eyes
I shed, I shed, poor me.
But, Cretans, children of Ida,
take up your bows and come to my aid,
swing your limbs and surround the house.

1359 And with you let the maiden Dictynna, Artemis the fair,
come with her little hounds through every part of the house;
and you, daughter of Zeus, holding up
twin-flamed torches, sharpest bright, in your hands,
Hecate, light my way
to Glyce's, so that
I can go in and catch her in the act.

DIONYSUS 1364 That's enough songs, both of you.

AESCHYLUS Enough for me too. Now I want to bring him to the scales. That's the only thing that will really test our poetry: the weight of our words will put us to the proof.

DIONYSUS 1368 Come over here, then, if I really have to do this too—weigh out the art of poets like cheese.

CHORUS

1370 Clever people do take pains.
For here's another marvel,
brand new, full of strangeness—/ who else would have
thought it up?
...
By the—I wouldn't have believed it
if any passer-by had told me;
I'd have thought
he was talking nonsense.

DIONYSUS 1378 Come on, stand next to the scale pans,

AESCHYLUS AND EURIPIDES There.

DIONYSUS 1379 and each of you take hold and say your line, and don't let go until I say "cuckoo."

AESCHYLUS AND EURIPIDES 1381 We've got hold.

DIONYSUS Now speak your line into the scales.

EURIPIDES 1382 "Would that the Argo's hull had never winged its way—"[106]

AESCHYLUS 1383 "River Spercheius, and pastures where the cattle roam."[107]

DIONYSUS 1384 Cuckoo! Let go. His side goes down a lot lower.

EURIPIDES 1385 And what on earth is the reason?

DIONYSUS 1386 Because he put in a river. He made his line wet, the way wool sellers wet their wool, and you put in a line with wings.

EURIPIDES 1389 Well, let him say something else and match it against mine.

DIONYSUS 1390 Take hold again, then.

AESCHYLUS AND EURIPIDES There.

106 The opening line of Euripides' *Medea*.
107 From Aeschylus' lost *Philoctetes*.

DIONYSUS Speak.

EURIPIDES 1391 "Persuasion has no temple other than the word."[108]

AESCHYLUS 1392 "For Death alone of gods has no desire for gifts."[109]

DIONYSUS 1393 Let go, let go! His side's sinking again. He put in death, the heaviest evil there is.

EURIPIDES 1395 And I put in persuasion, a beautifully spoken word.

DIONYSUS 1396 Persuasion is a lightweight thing with no sense in it. Look for something else, one of the heavyweights, that'll drag your side down for you, something strong and big.

EURIPIDES 1399 Come on, where have I got anything like that? Where?

DIONYSUS I'll tell you: "Achilles has thrown two ones and a four."[110]

1401 Go ahead, speak. This is your last weigh-in.

EURIPIDES 1402 "And in his right hand he took a club heavy with iron."[111]

AESCHYLUS 1403 "For chariot on chariot lay, and corpse on corpse."[112]

DIONYSUS 1404 He's fooled you again this time.

EURIPIDES How?

DIONYSUS 1405 He put in two chariots and two corpses. Not even a hundred Egyptian porters could lift that.

AESCHYLUS 1407 No more line by line for me. Let him get in the scales himself—him, his kids, his wife, Cephisophon—and sit

108 From Euripides' lost *Antigone*.
109 From Aeschylus' lost *Niobe*.
110 A line from Euripides' lost *Telephus*, about a poor throw of the dice.
111 From Euripides' lost *Meleager*.
112 From Aeschylus' lost *Glaucus of Potniae*.

there with all his books in his arms. I'll say just two lines of mine.

DIONYSUS 1411 My friends, I'm not going to judge between them. I don't want to be on bad terms with either one. I think one is skilled, and the other I enjoy.

PLUTO 1414 So you won't achieve any of what you came here for?

DIONYSUS 1415 And if I do judge?

PLUTO You'll take one of them and go, whichever you pick, so you won't have come for nothing.

DIONYSUS 1417 Bless you. All right, listen to me, both of you. I came down here for a poet. What for? So the city can be saved and keep on holding its choral festivals. So whichever of you gives the city some better advice, he's the one I think I'll take. First, then, about Alcibiades: what's your view, each of you? The city's in a difficult labor over him.[113]

EURIPIDES 1424 And what view does the city have of him?

DIONYSUS What view? It longs for him, it hates him, and it wants to have him. But tell me what you two think about him.

EURIPIDES 1427 I hate a citizen who is slow by nature to help his country and quick to do it great harm, resourceful for himself and useless to the city.

DIONYSUS 1430 Well said, by Poseidon! And you, what's your view?

AESCHYLUS 1431 One shouldn't rear a lion cub in the city. But if it has been reared, one should go along with its ways.

DIONYSUS 1433 By Zeus the Savior, I find this hard to decide. One of them spoke skillfully, the other clearly. But each of you give me one more view: what plan do you have for saving the city?

EURIPIDES 1437 If someone gave Cleocritus Cinesias for wings, the breezes would lift him over the flat expanse of the sea.[114]

113 Alcibiades, the brilliant and unscrupulous Athenian general, was in exile at the time (405 BC), and Athens was divided over recalling him.
114 Cleocritus was apparently a big, ungainly man; Cinesias was famously skinny.

DIONYSUS 1439 That would look funny. But what's the sense of it?

EURIPIDES 1440 If there were a sea battle, they could have little cruets of vinegar and sprinkle it in the enemy's eyes. I know the answer, and I want to tell you.

DIONYSUS 1442 Tell me.

EURIPIDES 1443 When we consider what is now untrusted trusty, and what is trusty untrusted.

DIONYSUS 1444 What? I don't follow. Say it somehow more stupidly and more clearly.

EURIPIDES 1446 If we stopped trusting the citizens we trust now, and made use of the ones we don't use, maybe we'd be saved. If we're doing badly with things as they are, then surely by doing the opposite we'd be saved?

DIONYSUS 1451 Well done, Palamedes, you most ingenious of creatures! Did you come up with that yourself, or was it Cephisophon?[115]

EURIPIDES 1453 All by myself. The vinegar cruets were Cephisophon's. What about you? What do you say?

AESCHYLUS 1454 First tell me who the city makes use of now. The good, decent men?

DIONYSUS 1455 Where would it get them? It hates them like poison.

AESCHYLUS 1456 And it enjoys the scoundrels?

DIONYSUS 1457 Not it, no. But it uses them because it has to.

AESCHYLUS 1458 Then how could anyone save a city like that, where neither a fine cloak nor a goat-hair rag will do?

DIONYSUS 1460 Find a way, by Zeus, if you're going to rise up again.

AESCHYLUS 1461 Up there I'd tell you. Down here I don't want to.

115 Palamedes, the legendary inventor, was the hero of a play by Euripides.

DIONYSUS 1462 No, don't do that. Send the good things up from down here.

AESCHYLUS 1463 When they consider the enemy's land their own, and their own the enemy's, and the ships their resources, and their resources no resource at all.[116]

DIONYSUS 1466 Good—except that the juror gulps it all down by himself.[117]

PLUTO 1467 You may judge now.

DIONYSUS This will be my judgment between you: I'll choose the one my soul wants.

EURIPIDES 1469 Remember the gods you swore by, that you'd take me back home, and choose your friends.

DIONYSUS 1471 "My tongue has sworn"—but I'll choose Aeschylus.[118]

EURIPIDES 1472 What have you done, you filthiest of men?

DIONYSUS Me? I judged Aeschylus the winner. Why shouldn't I?

EURIPIDES 1474 After doing the most shameful deed, you can look me in the face?

DIONYSUS 1475 "What's shameful, if it doesn't seem so" to the audience?[119]

EURIPIDES 1476 You heartless wretch, will you really just leave me here dead?

DIONYSUS 1477 "Who knows if living is being dead," and breathing is dining, and sleeping is a sheepskin?[120]

PLUTO 1479 Come inside, then, Dionysus, the two of you.

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116 The strategy Pericles had urged at the start of the war: abandon the countryside to the invaders, raid the enemy's land by sea, and rely on the fleet.
117 The pay for Athens' jurors used up public revenue that might have gone to the fleet.
118 Euripides' own line from *Hippolytus*, turned against him.
119 Parodying a notorious line from Euripides' lost *Aeolus*: "What's shameful, if it doesn't seem so to those who do it?"
120 Parodying Euripides' line "Who knows if living is being dead, and being dead is living?"; Dionysus adds a jingle on *pnein* (breathe) and *deipnein* (dine).

DIONYSUS What for?

PLUTO [1480] So I can entertain you both before you sail.

DIONYSUS Good idea, by Zeus. I don't mind that one bit.

SECOND EPISODE

The chorus praises Aeschylus' good sense and mocks idle chatter with Socrates.

CHORUS

[1482] Blessed is the man
with a finely honed intelligence.
There are many ways to learn this.
Here is a man who showed good sense,
and now he goes back home again,
for the good of the citizens,
for the good of his own
family and friends,
because he has intelligence.

[1491] The smart thing, then, is not to sit
beside Socrates chattering,
throwing away the art of the Muses
and leaving out the most important things
in the tragic art.
But to waste your time in idleness
on pompous talk
and hair-splitting drivel
is the mark of a man out of his mind.

EXODOS

Pluto sends Aeschylus back to save Athens, and Aeschylus leaves his chair to Sophocles.

PLUTO [1500] Go on, then, Aeschylus, go with joy, and save our city with good advice, and educate the fools—there are plenty of them. And take this and give it to Cleophon, and this to the rev-

enue officials, Myrmex and Nicomachus both, and this to Archenomus. And tell them to come down here to me quickly and not dawdle. And if they don't come quickly, by Apollo, I'll brand them and shackle their feet together, and send them down under the earth fast, along with Adeimantus, son of Leucolophus.[121]

AESCHYLUS 1515 I'll do it. And you, hand my chair over to Sophocles to guard and keep safe for me, in case I ever come back here. Because in skill I judge him second. And make sure that rascal, that liar and buffoon, never sits in my chair, not even by accident.[122]

PLUTO 1524 Then all of you, show the holy torches for him, and escort him on his way, celebrating him with his own songs and dances.

CHORUS

1528 First, grant a good journey to the poet as he goes,
rising up to the light, you powers beneath the earth,
and grant the city good ideas that bring great good.
For so we'd be wholly done with great griefs
and painful clashes in arms. Let Cleophon fight,
and any other of them who wants, in his ancestral fields.[123]

121 Pluto hands over instruments of suicide (a sword, a noose, poison); Nicomachus was revising the city's laws, Adeimantus was a general, and Myrmex and Archenomus are otherwise unknown.
122 Sophocles had died in 406 BC, shortly before the play was produced.
123 Cleophon's mother was said to be Thracian, so his "ancestral fields" are in Thrace.