

# Genuine Literary Criticism and Aristophanes' *Frogs*

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Aristophanes' *Frogs*, performed at Athens for the festival of Dionysus Lenaius in the early spring of 405 BCE, occupies a peculiar place in the history of literary criticism and in the history of ideas more generally. Indeed, the *Frogs* is usually the first text cited in a history of literary criticism because it exhibits a "historical awareness of literary change."<sup>1</sup> The primary function of the play, however, is not literary criticism but political action. Aristophanes' aim in the *Frogs* is not to save Athens from its second best playwright, Euripides, but from political dissolution.<sup>2</sup> At the time of the *Frogs*' first production, Sparta and her allies had been threatening Athenian welfare for twenty-six years.<sup>3</sup> I argue that the play is only superficially a quest to determine which of Athens' dead playwrights should return to Athens; moreover, I argue that in the *Frogs* we can make out the roots of literary criticism in Aristophanes' acute "awareness of literary change." However, to conclude that the play is primarily about literary criticism is to misunderstand it, underappreciate it, and to otherwise fumble the intricate order of innovations that led to the birth of genuine literary criticism.

It is important to keep in mind that if the above thesis is to be true, this does not mean that Aristophanes failed in an attempt at genuine literary criticism. The notion that he did is altogether

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<sup>1</sup> George Kennedy, *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism Vol. 1 Classical Criticism* (Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 1989), ix. "Criticism as an instinctive audience reaction to the performance of poetry is as old as song. Literary theory begins to emerge in Archaic Greece in the self-reference of oral bards and early literate poets and as part of the conceptualisation of ideas which marked the birth of Greek philosophy. A sense of literary history developed in observation of the changing function of poetry in the Greek states, in the realisation that the composition of heroic epic was becoming a thing of the past, and later in the perception that tragedy too had passed its acme. Aristophanes' *Frogs* in the fifth century and Plato's dialogues in the fourth [century] show historical awareness of literary change."

<sup>2</sup> Notably this is Aristophanes' aim in a number of his plays, e.g. *Acharnians*, *Peace*, and *Lysistrata*.

<sup>3</sup> The Peloponnesian War began in 431 BCE and ended in 404 BCE.

anachronistic. Truly, Aristophanes did not fail because he never intended to write genuine literary criticism and probably had no idea what such a thing entailed. Aristophanes did, however, intend to caricature Aeschylus and Euripides in order to effect his political aims. It is in service of his political agenda that Aristophanes limits his literary critical observations of Euripidean and Aeschylean tragedy. It is possible to see Aristophanes in his caricatures of Euripides and Aeschylus making choices that better align Euripides with that playwright's political antithesis. He firmly aligns Euripides with the new education typified by sophistry and Socrates. Indeed, in the *Frogs* Aristophanes criticizes Euripides and Aeschylus only in order to discuss the centrality of drama to political life at Athens. What appears as a genuine discussion of literature is at all times subservient to Aristophanes' political agenda.

In order to argue that there is no genuine literary criticism in the *Frogs*, we must first define genuine literary criticism. While it is almost universally agreed that the first piece of genuine literary criticism was Aristotle's *Poetics*, written in 335 BCE, there is less consensus as to what genuine literary criticism entails. Although literary critics disagree about the exact nature of genuine literary criticism, it will suffice for the purposes of this essay to keep in mind Rosemary Harriott's definition of genuine literary criticism. Harriott defines genuine literary criticism as "just and reasoned estimates of writers and their works [arrived at by] systematic analysis" for the purpose of enhancing a reader's understanding of literature.<sup>4</sup> With this definition in mind, it is possible to demonstrate that the *Frogs* is not a piece of genuine literary criticism.

In our analysis of what looks to be literary criticism in the *Frogs*, we will be primarily concerned with the contest which Dionysus presides over at the end of the *Frogs*. In this contest, Euripides and Aeschylus take turns criticizing each other while touting their own merits as playwrights. The contest takes place in the underworld, and the prize is a trip back to Athens accompanied by Dionysus. In the

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<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Harriott, *Poetry and Criticism Before Plato* (London: Methuen & Co., 1969), 161.

banter that is characteristic of the contest, Euripides criticizes the Aeschylean prologue as follows (lines 908-915).

Euripides: And verily the sort of poet I myself am  
 In the latter innings of this contest I shall tell,  
 But first I will shame this one,  
 I will show how he was a vagrant and a cheat  
 And in what ways he deceived  
 The dull theatergoers he received brought up on Phrynicus.  
 For first he would set up some veiled one,  
 Some Achilles or Niobe, not showing their aspect,  
 A mere show of tragedy, not saying a thing.

Dionysus: By Zeus they did not!

Euripides: And then the chorus set to work on strings  
 Of songs four in a row stitched together, while the veiled ones sat silent.<sup>5</sup>

Euripides' criticism of Aeschylean prologues is informative, but it is not genuine literary criticism as defined above. Dionysus' response to Euripides' critique shows that his observation was informative, but I maintain that the criticism is not genuine because it is not systematic. Aristophanes does not present his audience with a list of all the Aeschylean prologues that begin with a silent, seated, veiled figure. Such a list would constitute the systematic analysis required for genuine literary criticism. Perhaps such a list would not have been very funny, or perhaps it would have been, but the fact that it is omitted is important. It suggests that criticism in the *Frogs* is subservient to what is funny. This is not to say that Aristophanes' other observations—for example, that Aeschylean prologues often began with a chorus serenading a silent, seated, veiled figure—are inaccurate. Rather, the point is that he failed to prove it by systematic analysis.

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<sup>5</sup> (908-915) All translations are my own.

Εὐριπίδης: καὶ μὴν ἑμαυτὸν μὲν γε τὴν ποιήσιν οἶός εἰμι,  
 ἐν τοῖσιν ὑστάτοις φράσω, τοῦτον δὲ πρῶτ' ἐλέγξω,  
 ὡς ἦν ἀλαζῶν καὶ φέναξ οἷοις τε τοὺς θεατὰς  
 ἐξηπάτα μῶρους λαβῶν παρὰ Φρυνίχῳ τραφέντας.  
 πρῶτιστα μὲν γὰρ ἓνα τιν' ἂν καθῖσεν ἐγκαλύψας,  
 Ἀχιλλέα τιν' ἢ Νιόβην, τὸ πρόσωπον οὐχὶ δεικνύς,  
 πρόσχημα τῆς τραγωδίας, γρύζοντας οὐδὲ τουτί.

Διώνυσος: μὰ τὸν Δί' οὐ δῆθ'.

Εὐριπίδης: ὁ δὲ χορός γ' ἤρειδεν ὄρμαθούς ἄν μελῶν  
 ἐφεξῆς τέτταρας ξυνεχῶς ἄν οἱ δ' ἐσίγων.

Nonetheless, Aristophanes' Greek suggests that such an analysis is possible. He writes, "For first he would set up some veiled one, some Achilles or Niobe, not showing their aspect, a mere show of tragedy, not saying a thing." The subjunctive "would" implies that Aeschylus habitually started his plays in this manner. Further, by making the very well-known characters of Greek tragedy of Achilles and Niobe indefinite exemplars of Aeschylus's method, Aristophanes again suggests that Euripides' accusation is widely applicable to the prologues of Aeschylus. It seems likely that Aristophanes at a symposium in downtown fifth-century Athens would have been able to give the desired systematic analysis of Aeschylean prologues, but we unfortunately are not in a position to provide the hinted-at analysis.

Of the estimated seventy or more plays Aeschylus is thought to have written, only seven remain intact, and of these seven it is clear in only one that a silent character is dragged on stage while others converse. That play is *Prometheus Bound* and the character, who first speaks at line 89, is Prometheus. Unlike in Aristophanes' criticism, however, a chorus does not sing while Prometheus is dragged on stage; instead, Power and Hephaestus talk to each other. Still, if we grant that *Prometheus Bound* is one of the plays that is being criticized, and we add to this the plays Aristophanes mentions in which Achilles and Niobe sit silently veiled on stage while a chorus sings, we can figure that Aristophanes' criticism applies only to three of the seventy or more estimated plays of Aeschylus. Because his criticism is not well substantiated, we must conclude that it is not an example of genuine literary criticism. Nevertheless, while it is not genuine literary criticism, it is at least accurate in a number of cases.

Similar conclusions result from an analysis of Aristophanes' criticism of the Euripidean prologue. In the play, Aeschylus criticizes Euripides by replacing the final metrical foot and a half of real Euripidean prologues with the phrase "he lost his little bottle of oil" (*lekythion apolesen*). The criticism is funny, but again not an example of genuine literary criticism. It has been rightly noted that "the *lekythion* [the little

bottle of oil] business is 99 percent fun.”<sup>6</sup> The *lekythion* criticism of the Euripidean prologue cannot be genuine criticism because it has no point other than hilarity. Aristophanes nowhere tells us what he means by “the *lekythion* business,” nor is it even apparent that the meaning would have been clear to those in the audience. At best, Aristophanes seems to say that the last foot and a half of the first, second, or third line of Euripidean prologues has the same metrical construction as *lekythion apolesen*. Looking over the prologues to which *lekythion apolesen* is appended, it is possible to imagine what Aristophanes' criticism would have looked like if he had articulated it better. As the criticism stands, however, it is utterly subordinate to its comic ends and is therefore not genuine literary criticism.

After Aeschylus's abuse of Euripidean prologues, it is again Euripides' turn to criticize, and he chooses to criticize Aeschylean choral lyrics. Aristophanes' analysis of this aspect of Aeschylus's work is similarly opaque. What's more, it seems that the details would have been opaque even to the Athenian theatergoer. Euripides criticizes Aeschylean lyrics in general and then Aeschylean lyrics written especially for the lyre. He does so by parody, a method common in Old Comedy but by its very nature a questionable means of genuine literary criticism. In order to criticize Aeschylean lyrics, “Euripides... sings a pastiche of warlike, solemn lines drawn from a variety of plays, linked by a refrain whose meaning becomes increasingly irrelevant.”<sup>7</sup> The overall effect of the refrain, “O, ho, what a stroke, come you not to the rescue?”<sup>8</sup> is brilliant parody and almost mockery of the Aeschylean chorus, but a systematic analysis with definite conclusions is again lacking. The closest Euripides comes to stating the point of his parody is at line 1262, in which he says, “I will cut all his songs into one.”<sup>9</sup> This line at best hints at genuine literary criticism.

Presumably after drawing riotous Athenian laughter, Euripides moves to criticize Aeschylean lyrics written for the lyre. He uses the same method, except that this time, instead of a lyric refrain, he

<sup>6</sup> R. E. Wycherley, “Aristophanes and Euripides,” *Greece & Rome* 15, no. 45 (Oct. 1946), 102.

<sup>7</sup> Harriott, *Poetry and Criticism Before Plato*, 153.

<sup>8</sup> (1265) ἰὴ κόπον οὐ πελάθεις ἐπ' ἄρωγάν;

<sup>9</sup> (1262) εἰς ἓν γὰρ αὐτοῦ πάντα τὰ μέλη ξυντεμῶ.

makes use of an untranslatable musical refrain, “*tophlattothrat tophlattothrat*,” interspersed with recognizably Aeschylean lyrics. Again, “we are not sure...what is the point of the refrain *tophlattothrat*,” but “some features of metrical parody are clear.”<sup>10</sup> Aristophanes nowhere tells us why, technically speaking, *tophlattothrat tophlattothrat* captures the essence of Aeschylean lyric, and thus his criticism, which is utterly lacking in clarity, does not significantly enhance our understanding of Aeschylean literature. Hence, it fails to meet the standard of genuine literary criticism. Rosemary Harriott uses a nice analogy to describe the situation. It is a reasonable assumption that the music was recognizably Aeschylean:

Just as there are many people who could say that piece of music is by Chopin [Bruce Springsteen], and that it is a mazurka [a hunk of raw emotion], so Athenians are likely to have been able to discern the characteristics of the different styles, even if they could not say why a piece sounded Aeschylean.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, it seems likely that Aristophanes successfully conveyed his meaning to the Athenians without ever giving his criticism a genuine analytic voice; as a result, the full weight of his point which, in order to be funny, must have had a basis in fact, is utterly lost to us.

Aeschylus, in his turn, criticizes Euripides’ choral lyrics and Euripidean lyric monodies. Before he sets in on his parodies, though, he utters these very interesting lines (1301-1303).

Aeschylus: But this man draws [sc. lyrics] from every kind of source, harlot songs,  
Banquet songs of Meletos drinking, all that Karian jazz,  
Dirges, folksongs.<sup>12</sup>

Here, as is often the case in the *Frogs*, we would have genuine criticism if it were supported by a systematic analysis of the relevant plays. Instead, Aristophanes cuts straight to the point—the comic conclusions. If this description of Euripides were true, Aristophanes’ criticism would be genuine literary

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<sup>10</sup> Harriott, *Poetry and Criticism Before Plato*, 153.

<sup>11</sup> Harriott, *Poetry and Criticism Before Plato*, 154.

<sup>12</sup> (1301-1303)

Αἰσχύλος: οὗτος δ' ἀπὸ πάντων μὲν φέρει, πορνιδίων,  
σκολίων Μελήτου, Καρικῶν ἀύλημάτων,  
θρήνων, χορειῶν

criticism because it would certainly enhance our reading of Euripides, if we understood the origin of his lyrics. The reader or theatergoer would be invited to compare the songs of Euripides with harlot songs, the banqueting songs of Meletos, Karian jazz, dirges, and folksongs. This comparison could reveal different shades of meaning, tragedy, or irony. The fact remains, however, that Aristophanes does not draw connections between Euripides' songs and those he has Aeschylus list, nor does he present any evidence whatsoever for this comparison. As a result, Aeschylus's criticism of Euripidean lyrics lacks both supporting evidence and a point. Though not literary criticism, the following Euripidean parody, set to the jingle of castanets, comes close (lines 1309-1321):

Aeschylus: Halcyon birds who chatter beside the ever flowing waves of the sea  
 Wetting of wings with sea spray  
 Besprinkling the surface with a drop.  
 And who dwell under roof in the eaves.  
 With Fingers-wee-hee-heeving embattle  
 Woof – warp webs,  
 Of song of shuttle care  
 Where the flute-loving dolphin leaps  
 With dark prows prowling  
 Oracles and stades,  
 The sheen of grape shine grape vine,  
 The labor ending curl of a bunch of grapes.  
 Throw your elbows round me, my child.<sup>13</sup>

Afterward Aeschylus exclaims, presumably in disgust, “Just look at that line!” (line 1322);<sup>14</sup> yet this

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<sup>13</sup> (1309-1321)

Αἰσχύλος: ἀλκυόνες, αἱ παρ' ἀενάοις θαλάσσης  
 κύμασι στωμύλλετε,  
 τέγγουσαι νοτίοις πτερῶν  
 ῥανίσι χροά δροσιζόμεναι:  
 αἶθ' ὑπωρόφιοι κατὰ γωνίας  
 εἰεἰεἰεἰλίσσετε δακτύλοις φάλαγγες  
 ἰστόπονα πηνίσματα,  
 κερκίδος ἀοιδοῦ μελέτας,  
 ἴν' ὁ φίλαυλος ἔπαλλε δελφίς  
 πρῶραις κυανεμβόλοις  
 μαντεῖα καὶ σταδίους,  
 οἰάνθας γάνος ἀμπέλου,  
 βότρυος ἔλικα παυσίπονον.  
 περίβαλλ' ὦ τέκνον ὠλένας

<sup>14</sup> (1322)

parody is the closest thing to systematic analysis offered, and the conclusion, while colorful, is no more informative than a joke (lines 1326-1329):

Aeschylus: You [Euripides] writer of lines like that  
 You dare censure my verse.  
 Making your lyric in the twelve trick  
 Style of Cyrene [presumably a famous and flexible whore].<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, it is possible to surmise what genuine criticism of Euripides is implied by Aristophanes' abuse: that Euripides wrote glorified nonsense. Wycherley remarks that "[a] poet who wrote beautiful nonsense would be a mere 'twittering swallow' for Aristophanes."<sup>16</sup> In a comparison of the choral lyric criticisms, Wycherley further observes that "Aeschylus scores... simply because Aristophanes is able to produce a much more brilliant and effective parody of Euripides, catching the spirit of the lighter Euripidean lyric and turning it to nonsense... by comic exaggeration."<sup>17</sup> However, Wycherley does not assess to what degree the criticism of each is accurate; he merely considers which was likely to have done more damage to its opponent in the context of the contest in the *Frogs*. A systematic analysis which would determine whether each criticism is accurate would be another endeavor altogether. Moreover, for us it is an impossible task because Aristophanes does not provide us with the requisite data.

Aeschylus's criticism of Euripidean monody is likewise effective in the context of the contest, but the criticism is not an example of genuine literary criticism. Here is an exemplary section of his parody of Euripides' monody (lines 1346-1355):

Aeschylus: I, a wretched girl, happened to be plying  
 My tasks  
 The spindle full of flax

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ὄρας τὸν πόδα τοῦτον.

<sup>15</sup> (1326-1329)

Αἰσχύλος: τοιαυτὶ μέντοι σὺ ποιῶν  
 τολμᾷς τάμὰ μέλη ψέγειν,  
 ἀνὰ τὸ δωδεκαμήχανον  
 Κυρήνης μελοποιῶν;

<sup>16</sup> Wycherley, "Aristophanes and Euripides," 100.

<sup>17</sup> Wycherley, "Aristophanes and Euripides," 102.



We-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-heaving  
 With my hands, making a spindle  
 So that I at dawn might carry it  
 To market to market it there,  
 But he fluttered he fluttered away  
 On the air with nimble tipped wings  
 And sorrows sorrows he's lost to me  
 And tears tears from my eyes  
 I shed I shed. Poor me.<sup>18</sup>

To this Dionysus lamely concludes, “enough already of the lyric verse,” and Aeschylus says, “I too have had plenty” (lines 1363-1364)<sup>19</sup>. The criticism, unsubstantiated and not at all systematic, is nevertheless evident: Euripides glorifies the inglorious and repeats himself along the way. In a significant way, Aristophanes' criticism of Euripides is nonetheless informative, for in a number of places his criticism suggests that, in fifth-century Athens, moral lessons were an expected feature of poetry. Aeschylus pontificates in this vein (lines 1030-1036):

Aeschylus: For it is necessary that man poets forge these things. Indeed, examine  
 From the beginning how the noble aids of poets have come about.  
 Orpheus indeed discovered to us the mysteries and how to ward off death,  
 Mousaius discovered to us both the remedies of diseases and also oracles, Hesiod  
 Made known to us the deeds of the earth, the seasons of the fruits, the cornfields: the godly  
 Homer- from what save this did he gain honor and glory – that he taught useful things,  
 The arrangements of soldiers, the virtues, the accouterments of men?<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> (1346-1355)

Αἰσχύλος: ἐγὼ δ' ἂν τάλαινα προσέχους' ἔτυχον  
 ἔμαυτῆς ἔργοισι,  
 λίνου μεστόν ἄτρακτον  
 εἰειελίσσουσα χεροῖν  
 κλωστήρα ποιοῦς', ὅπως  
 κνεφαῖος εἰς ἀγορὰν  
 φέρους' ἀποδοίμαν:  
 ὁ δ' ἀνέπτατ' ἀνέπτατ' ἐς αἰθέρα  
 κουφοτάταις πτερύγων ἀκμαῖς:  
 ἐμοὶ δ' ἄχε' ἄχεα κατέλιπε,  
 δάκρυα δάκρυά τ' ἀπ' ὀμμάτων  
 ἔβαλον ἔβαλον ἂν τλάμων.

<sup>19</sup> (1363-1364)

Διόνυσος: παύσασθον ἤδη τῶν μελῶν

Αἰσχύλος: κάμοιγ' ἄλις.

<sup>20</sup> (1030-1036)

Αἰσχύλος: ταῦτα γὰρ ἄνδρας χρῆ ποιητὰς ἀσκεῖν. σκέψαι γὰρ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ὡς ὠφέλιμοι τῶν ποιητῶν οἱ γενναῖοι γεγέννηται. Ὅρφεὺς μὲν γὰρ τελετάς θ' ἡμῖν κατέδειξε φόνων τ' ἀπέχεσθαι,

While in some places Aeschylus's criticism of Euripides informs us about Athenian conceptions of poetry and poets and often effectively damages Euripides' chance of winning the contest, it does not in and of itself constitute genuine literary criticism.

Above we have seen how Aristophanes' criticism often falls short of genuine literary criticism on account of its lack of systematic analysis, but sometimes his criticism falls short of genuine literary criticism because it lacks relevance to literature. This criticism is much more relevant if it is understood in the co-dependent spheres of politics and education. For example, Aristophanes' criticism of Aeschylean diction in lines 1152-1166 does not, I think, even intend to make a point, but rather functions to ridicule sophistic analysis:

- Aeschylus: Become my savior and my ally, in answer to my prayer.  
For I have come to this land and I have returned.
- Euripides: Sage Aeschylus has said the same thing twice.
- Dionysus: How twice?
- Euripides: Look at his words and I'll tell you.  
"I am come to my land," he says, "and I return."  
'I come' is the same thing as 'I return.'
- Dionysus: By Zeus, it's as if someone said to their neighbor,  
'Lend me your kneading trough, and if you please, a trough to knead things in.'"
- Aeschylus: This is not so, you chatter man, but I have chosen the best of words.
- Euripides: How so? Show me what you're talking about.
- Aeschylus: 'To come' to a land means to come to one's own fatherland.  
But he has come of an altogether other circumstance too.  
An exile both returns and has arrived.
- Dionysus: Well done, by Apollo! What do you say, Euripides?<sup>21</sup>

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Μουσαῖος δ' ἑξακέσεις τε νόσων καὶ χρησμούς, Ἥσιος δὲ  
γῆς ἐργασίας, καρπῶν ὥρας, ἀρότους: ὁ δὲ θεῖος Ὀμηρος  
ἀπὸ τοῦ τιμῆν καὶ κλέος ἔσχεν πλὴν τοῦδ' ὅτι χρήστ' ἐδίδαξεν,  
τάξεις ἀρετᾶς ὀπλίσεις ἀνδρῶν;

<sup>21</sup> (1152- 1166)

- Αἰσχύλος: 'σωτήρ γενοῦ μοι σύμμαχος τ' αἰτουμένω.  
ἦκω γὰρ ἐς γῆν τήνδε καὶ κατέρχομαι—'
- Εὐριπίδης: δις ταυτόν ἡμῖν εἶπεν ὁ σοφὸς Αἰσχύλος.
- Διώνυσος: πῶς δις;
- Εὐριπίδης: σκόπει τὸ ῥῆμ': ἐγὼ δέ σοι φράσω.  
'ἦκω γὰρ ἐς γῆν,' φησί, 'καὶ κατέρχομαι.'  
'ἦκω' δὲ ταυτόν ἐστι τῷ 'κατέρχομαι.'
- Διώνυσος: νῆ τὸν Δί' ὥσπερ γ' εἴ τις εἴποι γείτονι,  
χρ ἦσον σὺ μάκτραν, εἰ δὲ βούλει, κάρδοπον.'

Kenneth Dover writes that “[m]eaning, definition, and correct diction were a major interest of many fifth-century intellectuals, notably Kratylos, Prodikos and Protagoras.”<sup>22</sup> That Aeschylus repeats himself on this occasion, or only seems to repeat himself—that is, if one buys his rebuttal—does not lead a reader of Aeschylus to a greater understanding of his work. It does, however, allow the reader to glimpse what may have been the common opinion of sophistic analysis among Aristophanes’ contemporaries—namely, that it worked wonders on political opponents and was capable of even more wondrous rebuttals of itself. Later in the contest, Dionysus, twice in the span of fifteen lines, calls on the gods to witness each playwright’s ability to turn his opponents’ arguments on their heads.

We have seen that Aristophanes in the *Frogs* does not contain genuine literary criticism, but as noted above, looking for intentional examples in the *Frogs* is an altogether anachronistic exercise. Aristophanes did not really fail at genuine literary criticism because he never intended to write genuine literary criticism and probably had no idea what such a thing entailed. To say that he did fail is to be insensitive and in some sense to deny that there was time before genuine literary criticism.<sup>23</sup> So if one goes to a place prior to the establishment of genuine literary criticism and reconsiders the *Frogs*, suddenly the contest (*agon*) in the *Frogs* will appear as the very curious thing it is.<sup>24</sup> In summarizing the prehistory of genuine literary criticism, Gregory Nagy writes:

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Αίσχύλος: οὐ δῆτα τοῦτό γ’ ὤ κατεστωμυλμένε  
 ἄνθρωπε ταῦτ’ ἔστ’, ἀλλ’ ἄριστ’ ἐπῶν ἔχον.  
 Εὐριπίδης: πῶς δῆ; διδάξον γάρ με καθ’ ὅ τι δὴ λέγεις;  
 Αίσχύλος: ἔλθειν’ μὲν ἐς γῆν ἔσθ’ ὅτω μετῆ πάτρας:  
 χωρὶς γὰρ ἄλλης συμφορᾶς ἐλήλυθεν:  
 φεύγων δ’ ἀνὴρ ἦκει’ τε καὶ κατέρχεται.’

Διόνυσος: εὖ νῆ τὸν Ἀπόλλω. τί σὺ λέγεις Εὐριπίδη;

<sup>22</sup> Dover, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Or anywhere, anytime, before Aristotle’s *Poetics* of 335 BC.

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Dover, *Aristophanes Frogs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Introduction. “We know that it [the *Frogs*] was by no means the only play in which poetry was treated as a topic of comedy, and it is highly probable that it was not even the first in which a contrast was drawn between Aeschylean and later tragedy. The relevant plays are twelve in number, five of them by Aristophanes. Two of the twelve, and almost certainly a third—Pherekrates’ *Krapataloi*, in which the ghost of Aeschylus had a speaking part—were earlier than *Frogs*, and the

The Alexandrian scholars who were in charge of the process of separation, discrimination, judgment, were the *kritikoi*, while the Classical authors who were 'judged worthy of inclusion' within the canon were called the *enkrithentes*. The *krisis* of the *enkrithentes*, however, starts not with the Alexandrian scholars, nor even with Aristotle ... the 'crisis' of this *krisis* is already under way in the archaic and classical periods of Greece, where songs and poetry were traditionally performed in a context of competition. What we see in the *agon* of the *Frogs* of Aristophanes is a dramatization of that competition between drama and drama, and this time the competition is happening *within* drama. This way, the ontogeny of drama is recapitulating its own phylogeny as a competitive medium, an *agon* calling for the *krisis* of selection.<sup>25</sup>

The *Frogs* is not the earliest extant text to robustly criticize literature, but it is remarkable in that it does so within literature. In the *Frogs* it is possible to see Lady Literature in labor, birthing Literary Criticism, but genuine literary criticism is only crowning. As Dover explains, "understanding of such implicit criticism [the criticism in the *Frogs*]... calls for much hard work."<sup>26</sup> What then, we ought to ask, comes easily in the *Frogs*? While "the ontogeny of drama" may well be "recapitulating its own phylogeny as a competitive medium," understanding this certainly does not come easily.

To summarize, at this point we have discovered that if genuine literary criticism is "just and reasoned estimates of writers and their works" arrived at by "systematic analysis" for the purpose of enhancing a reader's understanding of literature, then there is no genuine literary criticism in the *Frogs*.<sup>27</sup> So if it is not genuine literary criticism, the question becomes, what is Aristophanes driving at?

The climactic weighing of the verse may help to answer this question, for the weighing of verse functions not as genuine literary criticism but as criticism, it seems, of the sort of poetic criticism practiced in Athens in the time of Aristophanes. What such criticism looked like we can only imagine from the following lines (1365-1375):

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*Muses* of Phrynichos competed with *Frogs* in 405." The *Frogs* is still striking as the only extant play indicative of this trend.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory Nagy, "Early Greek Views of Poets and Poetry," in *Classical Criticism*, edited by George Kennedy, vol. 1 of *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, 1 and 68.

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth Dover, *Aristophanes Frogs*, 17. I understand the metaphor is belabored.

<sup>27</sup> Harriott, *Poetry and Criticism Before Plato*, 161.

Aeschylus: ...For now I want to bring him to the scale  
Which alone will test our poetry.  
For it will prove the weight of our phrases.

Dionysus: Then come hither, if it is necessary that I  
sell like cheese the craft of human poets.

Chorus: Painstaking are the men of wit,  
For once again here's another marvel,  
Brand new, full of the unusual, who else could have thought it up?  
Oh my, I'd never, not if anybody,  
Happening upon me, told me,  
Have believed it, but I would have thought  
He was talking nonsense.<sup>28</sup>

It might be concluded then that Greek literary critics of the late fifth century BCE, and perhaps common Athenians as well, were in the habit of invoking a metaphorical notion of “poetic weight.” Aristophanes lambastes this notion by showing that the concept of poetic weight is unanalyzable. Thus, it is clear that Aristophanes is criticizing something larger than the work of two playwrights: he is indicting the city itself for misunderstanding what is good for it.

Since Athenians were the greatest critics of their own plays and decided which play won first prize, Aristophanes wanted to make clear to them which type of playwright they ought to endorse. He does this by caricaturing Aeschylus and Euripides. These caricatures function to effect Aristophanes' political end. In service of this political end, Aristophanes limits his observations of Euripidean and Aeschylean literature.

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<sup>28</sup> Αἰσχύλος: ...ἐπὶ τὸν σταθμὸν γὰρ αὐτὸν ἀγαγεῖν βούλομαι,  
ὄπερ ἐξελέγξει τὴν ποίησιν νῶν μόνον.  
τὸ γὰρ βᾶρος νῶ βασανιεῖ τῶν ῥημάτων.

Διώνυσος: ἴτε δεῦρό νυν, εἶπερ γε δεῖ καὶ τοῦτό με  
ἀνδρῶν ποιητῶν τυροπωλῆσαι τέχνην.

Χορός: ἐπίπονοί γ' οἱ δεξιοί.  
τόδε γὰρ ἕτερον αὖ τέρας  
νεοχμὸν, ἀτοπίας πλέων,  
ὃ τίς ἂν ἐπενόησεν ἄλλος;  
μὰ τὸν ἐγὼ μὲν οὐδ' ἂν εἶ τις  
ἔλεγέ μοι τῶν ἐπιτυχόντων,  
ἐπιθόμην, ἀλλ' ὥόμην ἂν  
αὐτὸν αὐτὰ ληρεῖν.

That Aristophanes does caricature Euripides and Aeschylus is evident. Just before the *agon* begins, a conversation between slaves morally polarizes the two playwrights (lines 768-784):

Xanthias: So why has this disturbed Aeschylus?  
 Aeacus: He held the chair of tragedy  
 As the mightiest in that art.  
 Xanthias: And who does now?  
 Aeacus: Why, when Euripides came down, he started showing off  
 To the muggers and the clothes stealers,  
 The father-beaters, and burglars,  
 And that's the majority in Hades--and listening to  
 His counter speeches, and twists and turns,  
 They went mad and hailed him the wisest.  
 Then he, all excited, claimed the throne  
 Where Aeschylus was sitting.  
 Xanthias: And wasn't he bombarded?  
 Aeacus: Lord no, the Demos cried out to have a trial,  
 To see which was the better dramatist.  
 Xanthias: The crowd of rascals?  
 Aeacus: Oh yes, as high as heaven.  
 Xanthias: Didn't Aeschylus have others to take his side?  
 Aeacus: The best's a small group, just like here.  
*Pointing to the audience at the Lenaia*<sup>29</sup>

Euripides is a man of the mob in cahoots with the spectators present at the festival, and Aristophanes, in effect, calls all the spectators knaves (*πανούργων*). Objectively, it is simply false that clothes-stealers,

<sup>29</sup> Ξανθίας: τί δήτα τουτί τεθούρηκεν Αἰσχύλον;

Ἄιακος: ἐκεῖνος εἶχε τὸν τραγωδικὸν θρόνον,  
 ὡς ὦν κράτιστος τὴν τέχνην.

Ξανθίας: νυνὶ δὲ τίς;

Ἄιακος: ὅτε δὴ κατήλθ' Εὐριπίδης, ἐπεδείκνυτο  
 τοῖς λωποδύταις καὶ τοῖσι βαλλαντιοτόμοις  
 καὶ τοῖσι πατραλοῖαισι καὶ τοιχωρύχοις,  
 ὅπερ ἔστ' ἐν Ἄιδου πλῆθος,  
 οἱ δ' ἀκρώμενοι τῶν ἀντιλογιῶν  
 καὶ λυγισμῶν καὶ στροφῶν  
 ὑπερεμάνησαν κἀνόμισαν σοφώτατον:  
 κάπειτ' ἐπαρθεῖς ἀντελάβετο τοῦ θρόνου,  
 ἔν' Αἰσχύλος καθῆστο.

Ξανθίας: κούκ ἐβάλλετο;

Ἄιακος: μὰ Δί' ἀλλ' ὁ δῆμος ἀνεβόα κρίσιν ποιεῖν  
 ὁπότερος εἴη τὴν τέχνην σοφώτερος.

Ξανθίας: ὁ τῶν πανούργων;

Ἄιακος: νῆ Δί' οὐράνιον γ' ὅσον.

Ξανθίας: μετ' Αἰσχύλου δ' οὐκ ἦσαν ἕτεροι σύμμαχοι;

Ἄιακος: ὀλίγον τὸ χρηστόν ἐστιν, ὥσπερ ἐνθάδε.

father-beaters, and burglars are the only types found in the plays of Euripides. It must have also been false, as it is today, that these and only these types enjoyed Euripides. This is important because it is clear evidence that Aristophanes' criticism is not committed to accuracy in the way that literary criticism must be if it is to be genuine.

Throughout the play the chorus helps Aristophanes to develop his caricatures of Aeschylus and Euripides. At line 822, Aeschylus is on the receiving end of this choral description (lines 822-825):

Chorus: Bristling the shaggy-necked mane of his natural-hair crest,  
Terrible brow crumple, roaring,  
He will launch bolt-fastened phrases,  
Ripping the planks with gigantic blast of breath.<sup>30</sup>

At line 826, however, Euripides is on the receiving end of the following description (lines 826-829):

Chorus: Then the mouth-worker, tester of phrases,  
Smooth tongue, unfurling, stirring the reins  
Of envy, dissecting the utterances, will refine away by talk  
The great labor of his lungs.<sup>31</sup>

These descriptions are meant to exemplify the moral character of each playwright. Aeschylus, on the whole, is depicted, "as an irascible old gentleman, blindly prejudiced against anything new, and frequently reduced to a state of unreasoning fury."<sup>32</sup> Euripides is portrayed as opposite in every way. He is pointedly aggressive and his bold attempt to obtain the seat of tragedy is enough to demonstrate this.

At line 830 Euripides says, "I will not give up the throne, don't put [the idea] in your mind. For I say that I

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<sup>30</sup> Χορός: φρίξας δ' αὐτοκόμου λοφιᾶς λασιαύχενα χαίταν,  
δεινὸν ἐπισκύνιον ξυνάγων βρυχώμενος ἦσει  
ρήματα γομφοπαγῆ πινακηδὸν ἀποσπῶν  
γηγενεῖ φυσῆματι

<sup>31</sup> Χορός: ἔνθεν δὴ στοματοργὸς ἐπῶν βασανίστρια λίσφη  
γλῶσς' ἀνελισσομένη φθονεροῦς κινουῖσα χαλινούς  
ρήματα δαιομένη κατα λεπτολογήσει  
πλευμόνων πολὺν πόνον.

<sup>32</sup> Wycherley, "Aristophanes and Euripides," 101.

am stronger than this one with respect to the art.”<sup>33</sup> The caricature of Euripides favors anything new and even quite comically has his own gods (lines 888-889 and 892-894):

Euripides: Fine;  
but I have other gods I pray to....  
Air, my sustenance, and pivot of my tongue,  
And intelligence, and olfactory nostrils,  
To refute stoutly with whatever words I seize.<sup>34</sup>

He is confident in his own ability to prevail and his perseverance shows that this is so. He never acknowledges a blow (lines 1215-1216 and 1222-1224):

Euripides: It won't be a problem. For to this prologue  
He won't be able to attach that flask.  
...  
Dionysus: I think you should pull in your sails;  
That little oil flask blows big.  
...  
Euripides: By Demeter, I wouldn't think of it.  
For now this one here will knock it away from him.<sup>35</sup>

What is more, Euripides is a man of the next generation. It seems likely that:

Aristophanes has picked out and exaggerated certain aspects of Aeschylus [and Euripides], not because he was ignorant or blind, but because he was more concerned with the force of his *agon* than with the coherence and validity of [his literary criticism].<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Εὐριπίδης: οὐκ ἂν μεθείμην τοῦ θρόνου, μὴ νουθέτει.  
κρείττων γὰρ εἶναι φημι  
τούτου τὴν τέχνην

<sup>34</sup> Εὐριπίδης: καλῶς:  
ἕτεροι γὰρ εἰσιν οἷσιν εὐχομαι θεοῖς  
...  
αἰθὴρ ἔμον βόσκημα καὶ γλώσσης στρόφιγξ  
καὶ ξύνεσι καὶ μυκτῆρες ὄσφραντήριοι,  
ὀρθῶς μ' ἐλέγχειν ὧν ἂν ἄπτωμαι λόγων.

N.B. Socrates was sentenced to death six years after the *Frogs* was produced for “having his own god”.

<sup>35</sup> Εὐριπίδης: ἀλλ' οὐδὲν ἔσται πρᾶγμα: πρὸς γὰρ τουτονὶ  
τὸν πρόλογον οὐχ ἔξει προσάψαι λήκυθον.

Διόνυσος: ὑφέσθαι μοι δοκεῖ:  
τὸ ληκύθιον γὰρ τοῦτο πνευσεῖται πολὺ.

Εὐριπίδης: οὐδ' ἂν μὰ τὴν Δήμητρα φροντίσαιμι γε:  
νυνὶ γὰρ αὐτοῦ τοῦτό γ' ἐκκεκόψεται

<sup>36</sup> Preface, Lattimore translation.



Moreover, in the *Frogs* Euripides and Aeschylus argue according to the virtues of their respective caricatures. Thus, Aristophanes doesn't altogether accurately depict Aeschylus and Euripides, but caricatures them so that each might stand for something more than what he is—a dead playwright.

Indeed, in the caricatures it is possible to detect Aristophanes making choices that better align Euripides with his political antithesis, for it is evident in the *Frogs* that “Aristophanes treats as one issues that we should divide into religious, political and artistic.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, Aristophanes treats the work of Euripides and Aeschylus not as art but as a whole bag of religious, political, educational and artistic views. In the *Frogs*, “there is no opposition between ‘life’ and ‘literature,’ no idea that literature provides an escape from life nor that it is an adornment to the city nor that it supplies objects for aesthetic contemplation.”<sup>38</sup> Aristophanes aligns Euripides firmly with the new education typified by sophistry and Socrates. After Aeschylus is chosen and Euripides is left to die, the chorus describes the education of Aeschylus thus (lines 1483-1491):

Chorus: Blessed is the man in possession  
Of sharpened intelligence.  
It is possible to learn this in many ways.  
For this one proving to know well  
Returns again to his fatherland,  
To act for the good of his fellow citizens  
For the good of his very self,  
His family and friends,  
On account of his wisdom.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast, the chorus describes the education of Euripides thus (lines 1491-1499):

Chorus: So it is refined not by Socrates

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<sup>37</sup> Harriott, *Poetry and Criticism Before Plato*, 157.

<sup>38</sup> Harriott, *Poetry and Criticism Before Plato*, 157.

<sup>39</sup> Χορός: μακάριός γ' ἀνήρ ἔχων  
ξύνεσιν ἠκριβωμένην.  
πάρα δὲ πολλοῖσιν μαθεῖν.  
ὄδε γὰρ εὖ φρονεῖν δοκήσας  
πάλιν ἄπεισιν οἴκαδ' αὖ,  
ἐπ' ἀγαθῷ μὲν τοῖς πολίταις,  
ἐπ' ἀγαθῷ δὲ τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ  
ξυγγενέσι τε καὶ φίλοισι,  
διὰ τὸ συνετὸς εἶναι.

To sit and chatter  
 Casting aside music  
 And neglecting the greatest things  
 In the art of tragedy.  
 But it is of a man deranged  
 To make glistening discourse  
 On august words  
 With the scrapings of trash.<sup>40</sup>

While Aristophanes found Euripides “full of subtleties and sophistries,” it is critical that contrary to Aristophanes' caricature, Euripides was, in fact, “fundamentally opposed to the sophistic spirit in its more violent manifestations.”<sup>41</sup> What is more, Wycherley thinks that “Aristophanes must have realized it.”<sup>42</sup> If this was the case, then Aristophanes made a deliberate choice to misrepresent Euripides as a proponent of the new education. Thus, the caricatures in the *Frogs* are neither simply artistic nor comical, but political and not altogether honest.

By the end of the *Frogs*, proponents of Euripides ought to feel slighted. Consider, for example, the *Troades* of Euripides produced immediately after the destruction of Melos, which “contained a bitter reproach of the Athenians for their brutality, and a solemn warning.”<sup>43</sup> As the caricatures in the *Frogs* would have it, Euripides is a man of the democratic mob and he is partially responsible for the brash decisions made by Athens in the last few decades of the fifth century BCE. Aristophanes caricatures Euripides so as to better align him with his political opponents. Thus, when Dionysus decides to bring Aeschylus back with him to Athens, Aristophanes damns not only Euripides, but also the new

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<sup>40</sup> Χορός: χαρίεν οὔν μὴ Σωκράτει  
 παρακαθήμενον λαλεῖν,  
 ἀποβαλόντα μουσικὴν  
 τὰ τε μέγιστα παραλιπόντα  
 τῆς τραγωδικῆς τέχνης.  
 τὸ δ' ἐπὶ σεμνοῖσιν λόγοισι  
 καὶ σκαριφησμοῖσι λήρων  
 διατριβὴν ἀργὸν ποιεῖσθαι,  
 παραφρονοῦντος ἀνδρός

<sup>41</sup> Wycherley, “Aristophanes and Euripides,” 105. The most violent manifestation of sophism being that, “there is no right but might”. Wycherly notes that in this, “There is no room... for sympathy with the suffering, the weak, and the defeated, which Euripides felt so intensely.”

<sup>42</sup> Wycherley, “Aristophanes and Euripides,” 105.

<sup>43</sup> Thucydides, *Book V*. The destruction of Melos was in 416.

education and the new political figures educated by Athens: they fall as one and fall by the sole decision of a god, for when Dionysus issues his judgment, he says, "This will be my decision for them: I'll choose the one my soul desires."<sup>44</sup> The decision (*krisis*) of Dionysus is the linchpin of the *Frogs*. At the moment of Dionysus' decision the unaware reader or spectator realizes that the contest, the tremendous awareness of literary change, and Dionysus' journey to the underworld have been more than just fun.

In the *Frogs*, Aristophanes criticizes Euripides and Aeschylus only in order to discuss the centrality of drama to political life at Athens. What appears as a genuine discussion of literature is at all times subservient to Aristophanes' political agenda. However, the *Frogs* does raise controversial and critical literary questions. Can a poet use ordinary words and introduce familiar, everyday objects into tragedy? And further, does the audience need always to be confused by the lofty thought and diction of tragedy, or can a tragedy be plain spoken? Are ugly realities a fit subject for art or should they be hidden?<sup>45</sup> These questions are, however, overshadowed by the political overtones of the play, and Aristophanes' advice to the Athenians overwhelms the budding literary criticism.

Aristophanes seeks not so much to condemn Euripides as to remedy his ailing city by means of parody and criticism. The remedy he offers is not Aeschylus, for he is dead and the play will not really bring him back. Nor is it the tragedies he wrote, for those would entail many an opaque chorus. Aristophanes' remedy is the advice of the Aeschylus in the *Frogs* and the advice of his choral parabasis. I must leave a discussion of exactly what this advice is for another essay, but for the time being, we may conclude that by the time the *Frogs* was produced at Athens in 405 BCE, Athenians were—thanks to the comedy of Aristophanes—aware of literary change, and further, that the birth of genuine literary criticism would have to wait for another medium.

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<sup>44</sup> (Lines 1467-1468)

Διόνυσος: αὕτη σφῶν κρίσις γενήσεται:  
αἰρήσομαι γὰρ ὄνπερ ἡ ψυχὴ θέλει.

<sup>45</sup> Wycherley, "Aristophanes and Euripides," 103.

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