

Indo-European Poesy and the “Ship of State” in Aristophanes’s *The Frogs*

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Introduction

Among several Indo-European poetic and literary inheritances Aristophanes draws from in his play *The Frogs*, a crucial one seems to have been overlooked thus far, even though it ties together seemingly disparate scenes and motifs in the play. This is the metaphor analogizing poets to carpenters, their craft—poems—to ships, and their recitation and composition to sailing. Tying this inherited poetic trope in with the metaphorical “ship-of-state” and the on-the-ground importance of Athens’s naval culture and service to its polity makes this trope into more than just a technique for poetic embellishment. Rather, it becomes a crucial element in interpreting the literary and political significance of these aforementioned disparate sections of the play. Indeed, this theme underpins the motivations of characters and the play’s overall message: the civic importance of poetry, with *the Frogs* being one of Aristophanes’s plays which most pointedly pushes this idea.

When considering *The Frogs*, one may note that the first and second halves of the play are in many ways intentionally disparate, which is fitting for a play about transformation. The first half centers on Dionysus’s journey to the underworld, and the second centers on the *agōn*, or competition, of the poets. In the first half, Dionysus is essentially a comic character, as much a buffoon to be ridiculed as his slave Xanthias. In the second half, however, the character of Dionysus undergoes a transformation, gaining considerable gravitas and being appointed judge of the *agōn* between Aeschylus and Euripides. What also unusually splits this play in two is Aristophanes’s switch from the chorus of frogs in the first half to a chorus of sacred initiates in the second half—an important detail that will be discussed later in this essay. So, what links these halves together? Again, I propose that the motif of poetry and ships binds them.

The Frogs Part I

Let us first look at the wider Indo-European context for this trope and then see how *The Frogs* may fit into it. As classicist Martin West lays out in his book *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, the comparative evidence indicates that the poet of Indo-European times was often compared to a carpenter.¹ This motif, besides appearing in other branches of the Indo-European languages, is attested in other texts in the Greek corpus as well, especially in the works of Pindar. For the Indo-Europeans, the most elaborate feats of carpentry were chariots and ships. It is hardly surprising then that the composition of poetry, or poesy, was compared to building chariots and ships. The process of poesy was itself likened not only to the process of building these works of carpentry, but also to a journey made on a chariot or a ship. After all, one does not build vehicles merely to admire them, but also to employ them.²

¹ Martin L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 38–43.

² West, *Indo-European Poetry*, 38–43.

The carpentry and nautical motif is present in both halves of *The Frogs*. Let us review the motif’s appearance in both halves in order. In the first half, Dionysus is on his way to the underworld to bring back Euripides from the dead. To do so, Dionysus must travel on Charon’s ship to cross over a lake. In doing this, interestingly, he is inducted into the crew of rowers on Charon’s boat, as opposed to merely coming along for the ride. After bumbling around like an idiot, Dionysus asks how an inexperienced landlubber like him is supposed to learn how to row with the rest of the crew. Charon replies that it is an easy task, since the songs of the frogs will come to him as soon as he starts. Indeed, the chorus of frogs then appear and sing as Dionysus and the crew row Charon’s ship across to the underworld.

This scene is clearly a comedic one making light of the learning process, such as when a green Athenian sailor starts learning how to row in the Athenian fleet. But this scene should also remind us of the Indo-European motif just mentioned. Poets like Pindar describe themselves as making journeys in their ship of song, but interestingly enough, we often see such ships ferrying divinities and songs between the Earth and other realms in Vedic literature as well. Vedic Sanskrit is the early, pre-Classical form of the Sanskrit language. The corpus of Vedic Sanskrit literature is one of the most useful materials to study in order to observe the Indo-European aspects of Greek literature. Consider, in this respect, a section of a Vedic hymn, *Rigveda* VIII.96.11, which describes the god Indra as riding hymns and suggests that the way to reach him is through a ship comparable to a song:

*ukthāvāhase vibhve manīṣāṃ druṇā ná pārām īrayā nadīnām.*³

To him whose vehicle is hymns, to the far-ranging one send an inspired
thought like a (boat) to the far shore of rivers with a wooden (paddle).⁴

Like Indra, Dionysus also makes his journey between the human world and the supernatural world in such a ship, facilitated by the frogs’ song.

The Rigvedic “Frog Hymn” (*RV* VII.103) offers striking parallels in multiple respects to the frogs’ chorus that follows. This hymn was performed for the start of the monsoon season in India, as part of a rebirth and fertility ritual that coincided with the rebirth occurring in nature. The frogs, having wilted up and remained dormant during the dry season, are reawakened by the arrival of water, and croak and splash around in the marshes. This hymn also likens the vocalizations of these frogs to those of initiated students learning chants from their teachers and fathers and then reciting them.⁵

Just like the Vedic ritual, both the Lenaia festival, at which *The Frogs* was performed, and the Anthesteria festival, which the frogs sing about, took place during the Mediterranean rainy season. Both festivals honored Dionysus, a god closely associated with rebirth. The Anthesteria in particular worshipped “Dionysus in the Marshes,” hence the association with frogs, and involved ritual drinks and libations of wine.⁶ Let us compare the two passages from the *Rigveda* and *The Frogs*:

³ “*RV* VIII.96.11,” Kevin Ryan, Rig-Veda Search, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://meluhha.com/rv/>.

⁴ Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton, trans., *The Rigveda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), verse VIII.96.11,

⁵ Jamison and Brereton, trans., *The Rigveda*, verse VII.103.

⁶ Devon Harlow, “Aristophanes,” (lecture, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, 2020).

1. Having lain still for a year (like) brahmins following their commandment,
the frogs have spoken forth a speech quickened by Parjanya.
2. When the heavenly waters have come to him, lying like a dried leather bag in the pond,
like the bellow of cows with their calves, the call of the frogs comes together here.
3. When it has rained on them, who are yearning and thirsting, when the rainy season has
come,
saying “akhkhala” (/repeating syllables) like a son to a father (at lessons), one goes up
close to the other who is speaking.
4. One of the two grasps the other from behind, when they have become exhilarated in the
discharge of the waters,
when the frog, rained upon, has hopped and hopped, and the speckled one mixes his
speech with the green one.
5. Once one of them speaks the speech of the other, like a pupil that of his teacher,
(then) a whole section of them speaks as if in unison, when you of good speech speak
amid the waters.
6. One of them has a cow’s bellow, one a goat’s bleat; one is speckled, one green.
bearing the same name but different forms, they ornament their voice in many ways as
they speak.
7. Like brahmins at an “Overnight” soma ritual, speaking around (a soma vessel) full like a
pond,
You cycle around to that day of the year, which, o frogs, is the one marking the rainy
season.
8. The brahmins, having soma, have made speech, creating their yearly sacred formulation.
The Adhvaryus, having the hot ritual milk-drink (at the Pravargya ritual), sweating,
become visible; none are hidden.
9. They guarded the godly establishment of the twelve(-month); these men do not confound
the season.
In a year, when the rainy season has come, the heated ritual milk-drinks obtain their own
release.
10. The one with a cow’s bellow has given, the one with a goat’s bleat has given, the
speckled one has given, the green one (has given) us goods.
The frogs, giving hundred[s] of cows, lengthened (their/our) life at a “Pressing of
Thousands.”⁷

βρεκεκεκεξ κοὰξ κοὰξ,
 βρεκεκεκεξ κοὰξ κοὰξ.
 λιμναῖα κρηνῶν τέκνα,
 ξύναυλον ὕμνων βοᾶν
 φθεγξώμεθ', εὐγερυν ἐμὰν
 αἰοιδάν, κοὰξ κοὰξ,
 ἦν ἀμφὶ Νυσήιον
 Διὸς Διόνυσον ἐν
 λίμναισιν ἰαχίσαμεν,
 ἥνιχ' ὁ κραιπαλόκωμος

⁷ Jamison and Brereton, trans., *The Rigveda*, verse VII.103. The parentheses here encompass both the parenthesized and the square bracketed text from the original translation, while the square brackets here are my own insertion.

τοῖς ἱεροῖσι Χύτροις χωρεῖ
κατ’ ἐμὸν τέμενος λαῶν ὄχλος.
βρεκεκεκεξ κοᾶξ κοᾶξ.

Brekekekex koax koax,
brekekekex koax koax!
Children of lake and stream,
let’s voice a cry in concert with the pipes,
our own euphonious
song—koax koax—
that once we sounded
for the Nysean son of Zeus,
Dionysus, in the Marshes,
when the hungover throng of revelers
on holy Pot Day
reeled through my precinct.
Brekekekex koax koax!

μᾶλλον μὲν οὖν φθελγζόμεσθ’,
εἰ δὴ ποτ’ εὐηλίαις
ἐν ἀμέραισιν
ἠλάμεσθα διὰ κυπείρου
καὶ φλέω, χαίροντες ὥδῃς
πολυκολύμβοισι μέλεσιν,
ἢ Διὸς φεύγοντες ὄμβρον
ἐνυδρον ἐν βυθῷ χορείαν
αἰόλαν ἐφθελγζάμεσθα
Πομφολυγοπαφλάσμασιν.

Oh no, we’ll sound off
even louder, if ever
on sunshiny days
we hopped through sedge
and reed, rejoicing in our song’s
busily diving melodies,
or if ever in flight from Zeus’ rain
we chimed underwater in the depths
a chorale spangled with
bubbly ploppifications.⁸

After their song on the way to the Underworld, the chorus of frogs is quickly replaced by a chorus of initiates to Iacchus (Dionysus). They, similar to the frogs, describe their own revels during festivals to Dionysus. It should be a reasonable assumption to assume an intended

⁸ Aristophanes, *Frogs. Assemblywomen. Wealth*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Henderson, Loeb Classical Library 180 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), lines 209–20, 241–49.

relationship between the two choruses, or possibly that one turns into the other: a transformation, no doubt, which the chorus actors would have made in changing their roles. Just as Dionysus transforms in his journey to the underworld and becomes the authoritative judge of the *agōn*, the chorus transforms into a group of holy people intelligent enough to call out the crimes and excesses of Athenian politicians. If we take the Vedic comparison into account, this association between the frogs and the initiates becomes even stronger. Both texts compare sacred initiates to frogs and their chanting to croaks, setting the jubilant, comedic scene in the rainy season as part of a metaphorical rebirth ritual which heavily features ritual beverages. Notice too that as much as Dionysus and the frogs argue, Dionysus still mimics their speech, just like the frogs and initiates in the Vedic material. To attempt to posit that the correspondence between these two texts is directly inherited is too ambitious a project for limited scope of this paper. However, it is an intriguing parallel which only strengthens the association of the two choruses as transformations of the same characters and informs the wider association we are investigating.

The Frogs Part II

A crucial verbal root used to describe both poesy and carpentry that appears across the Indo-European world is $\sqrt{tetk-}$,⁹ itself likely derived from the root $\sqrt{tek-}$.¹⁰ These verbal roots have a meaning connoting “construct” or “produce.”

Let us look at lines 818–825 of *The Frogs*. The chorus is anticipating the *agōn* between Aeschylus and Euripides, where they will engage in poetic combat—poetic face-offs, incidentally, are another Indo-European trope.

ἔσται δ' ἱπολόφων τε λόγων κορυθαίολα νείκη
σχινδαλάμων τε παραζόνια σμιλεύματά τ' ἔργων,
 φωτὸς ἀμυνομένου φρενοτέκτονος ἀνδρὸς
 ῥήμαθ' ἱποβάμονα.
 φρίζας δ' αὐτοκόμου λοφιᾶς λασιαύχενα χαίταν,
 δεινὸν ἐπισκύνιον ξυνάγων, βρυχώμενος ἥσει
ῥήματα γομποπαγῇ, πινακηδὸν ἀποσπῶν
 γηγενεῖ φύσῃματι.

We'll have helmet-glinting struggles of tall-crested words,
 we'll have **linchpin-shavings** and **chisel-parings of artworks**
 as a man fends off a **thought-building hero's**
 galloping utterances.
 Bristling the shaggy-necked shock of his hirsute ridge of mane,
 his formidable brow frowning, with a roar he will hurl
utterances bolted together, tearing off timbers
 with his gigantic blast.¹¹

⁹ West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 38–40.

¹⁰ Helmut Rix and Martin Kümmel, *Lexikon Der Indogermanischen Verben: LIV: Die Wurzeln Und Ihre Primärstambildungen* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2001), 618, 638–639.

¹¹ Aristophanes, *Frogs*, lines 818–825.

This passage is rife with metaphors likening poesy to carpentry; “linchpin-shavings and chisel-parings of (art)works,”¹² “thought-building hero,” and “utterances bolted together, tearing off timbers” are all very evocative of this motif. The poets are described as “*phrenotektōn*,” “thought-building,” using the same **√tetk* or **√tek*- root that is commonly used in this context. Note, for example, this similar usage in Vedic Sanskrit in *RV* 3.38.1:

φρενοτέκτονος
thought-building¹³

*abhi tūṣṭeva dīdayā manīṣām*¹⁴
I have thought out the song like a carpenter.¹⁵

Both the Indo-European ship and the chariot metaphors also seem to be at play here. Descriptions of “tall-crested words,” “galloping utterances,” “linchpin-shavings,” and the “shaggy-necked shock of his hirsute ridge of mane” are all reminiscent of chariots, and “utterances bolted together, tearing off timbers” evokes a ship’s deck and mast.¹⁶ Note how a similar Rigvedic passage, *RV* II.39.4, juxtaposes the same elements:

*nāvéva naḥ pārayataṃ yugéva nābhyeva na upadhīva pradhīva*¹⁷

Like boats, take us across—like yokes, like wheel naves, like a wheel’s
cross-pieces, like its outer pieces, (take) us (across).¹⁸

Clearly, then, the Indo-European poetic carpentry/vehicle metaphor is current in both halves of *the Frogs*, and its literary significance to the play will now be discussed.

Interpretation and Conclusion

The equivalence of ships and poetry is found in both halves of the play, but to what end? The key point to emphasize is the striking interpretative force of this metaphor in light of the famous political motif of the “ship-of-state.” This motif is most famously employed by Plato in *The Republic* 6.488–489, but it is attested well before him in the works of Archilocus, Alcaeus, Aeschylus, and Sophocles.¹⁹ These poets compare the political turmoil of a state in crisis to a ship in stormy weather, with both needing a steady hand at the helm. Plato makes the point that only someone who is well-equipped to guide the ship—or the state—should be in charge, not simply whoever is popular. Although *The Republic* postcedes *The Frogs*, Aristophanes is clearly thinking about similar matters, as we see in his parabasis:

¹² “Art-” as part of “artworks” is an insertion by Henderson in his translation. The Greek word ‘ἔργον’ is best translated merely as “work” in the context of the carpentry metaphor.

¹³ Aristophanes, *Frogs*, line 820.

¹⁴ “*RV* 3.38.1,” Kevin Ryan, Rig-Veda Search, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://meluhha.com/rv/>.

¹⁵ West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 38.

¹⁶ Aristophanes, *Frogs*, trans. Kenneth James Dover (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), lines 818–825.

¹⁷ “*RV* II.39.4,” Kevin Ryan, Rig-Veda Search, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://meluhha.com/rv/>.

¹⁸ Jamison and Brereton, *The Rigveda*, verse II.39.4.

¹⁹ See Archilochus, fragment 105 West; Alcaeus, fragments 6, 208, and 249; Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*; and Sophocles, *Antigone*.

πάντας ἀνθρώπους ἐκόντες ξυγγενεῖς κτησώμεθα
 κἀπιτίμους καὶ πολίτας, ὅστις ἂν ξυνναυμαχῇ.
 εἰ δὲ ταῦτ’ ὀγκωσόμεσθα κάποσεμνυνούμεθα,
 τὴν πόλιν καὶ ταῦτ’ ἔχοντες κυμάτων ἐν ἀγκάλαις,
 ὑστέρῳ χρόνῳ ποτ’ αὖθις εὖ φρονεῖν οὐ δόξομεν.

and let’s readily accept as kinsmen and as citizens
 in good standing **everyone who fights on our ships.**
 If we puff ourselves up about this and are too proud to do it,
 especially now that **we have a city “embraced by high seas,”**
 there will come a time when we’ll seem to have acted thoughtlessly.²⁰

So why might Dionysus have been searching for a good poet to bring back to Earth? I argue that it is not just because of some aimless perception of a want of artistry, now that these great poets are dead. The lack of good poets is itself a lack of governors to guide Athens’s poetic, moral, and political ship—an exceedingly apt metaphor for a state and culture as nautically inclined as Athens.

In addition, we get the sense that poetry can change people for the better and can generally be a wise and moral guide. The poetic journey transforms both Dionysus and the chorus into the weighty and intelligent characters they are in the second half of the play, unlike the dunces they were earlier. This can be extrapolated to the wider Athenian citizenry too. When considering Dionysus’s induction into the rowers as a scene modeling an Athenian citizen’s induction, one may surmise that much as Dionysus must learn to row from the chorus of frogs (albeit in a comedic light), the Athenian citizenry likewise must acquire the ability to “row” its ship of state by listening to the chants of the initiates and poets, and must also do their part to support their collective poetic naval voyage. The initiates of the chorus, after all, are the ones who deliver the parabasis and various criticisms of Athenian politics.

In this light, it also makes sense that the slave Xanthias is excluded from the enterprise of rowing in Charon’s ship. To Aristophanes, citizenship is synonymous with rowing—rowing the ship of poetry, rowing the ship of state, and rowing in the physical Athenian navy. As the text states, Xanthias did not row at Arginusae and thus did not gain citizenship. As such, he also never gains the right to participate in the ship-of-state and is therefore also excluded from Charon’s ship of state and song. Unlike Dionysus or the frog chorus, Xanthias never undergoes a positive change through a poetic journey. The parabasis ties into this idea as well, since Aristophanes here advocates that anyone who has served Athens by rowing its fleet be given leniency and citizenship. Clearly, those who have shown willingness to do their duty to the Athenian state are the ones who are truly worthy of citizenship. The poets—that is, the initiates and Aristophanes both—are guiding the Athenian ship of state by constructing a ship of song—this very play. The play/ship in turn asks for more rowers to drive the ship of state—that is, by enfranchising more people—just as Charon does earlier in the play.

The ship imagery that Aristophanes uses operates on three levels both simultaneously and interconnectedly. One, as an archaic, inherited metaphor for poetry; two, as a more locally Greek metaphor for the state; and three, as a shared point of reference at an on-the-ground, nitty-gritty, real-world level, for the nautically minded Athenians to analogize. By analogizing shipbuilding

²⁰ Aristophanes, *Frogs*, trans. Henderson, lines 701–05.

and sailing to poesy, and by relating the act of rowing in ships with citizenship, Aristophanes intertwines the proper construction and appreciation of poetry with the health of the Athenian polity and participation within it. Through poetry, a buffoon crosses over to wisdom, and a layabout becomes a productive member of society. Such a man does his part to help row the ship of state, under the guidance of the poets constructing the ship and wisely directing its course. Only he who rows along with his fellow citizens in such a manner is worthy of being called Athenian.

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