

Aristophanes

FROGS

Historical Note

Aristophanes (c. 456 BC to c. 386 BC) was the foremost writer of comic drama in classical Athens. His surviving plays are the only complete examples we have of Old Comedy. *Frogs* was first produced in Athens in 405 BC. By this time Athens had been at war with Sparta for over twenty-five years.

Dramatis Personae

XANTHIAS: a slave

DIONYSUS: the god, appearing in human form as a middle-aged man

HERCULES: the legendary hero

CORPSE: a dead man being carried off to Hades

CHARON: the ferry man transporting the dead to Hades

CHORUS OF FROGS

CHORUS OF INITIATES: worshippers of the gods of the underworld

AEACUS: a gatekeeper in Hades

SERVANT

FIRST HOSTESS (PANDOKETRIA)

SECOND HOSTESS (PLATANE)

SERVANT OF PLUTO

EURIPIDES: the playwright

AESCHYLUS: the playwright

PLUTO: king of Hades

VARIOUS ATTENDANTS

[The play opens on a street leading to Hades, with a door in the centre of the backstage area. Enter Dionysus, appearing as a middle-aged man with a noticeable paunch, wearing a yellow tunic and over that a lion skin. He's carrying a huge club, one commonly associated with Hercules. On his feet he wears soft leather lace-up boots. Behind him comes his slave Xanthias riding on a donkey and carrying a huge amount of luggage. Xanthias notices the audience]

XANTHIAS

Look, master, an audience! Shouldn't I say something?

Tell them one of those jokes they always fall for?

DIONYSUS

O, all right—say what you like. Only no jokes

about how you're dying to piss. I can't stand those—
they're all so stale.

XANTHIAS

What about my other jokes?

DIONYSUS

Go ahead—just nothing about your bladder,
about how it's going to burst.

XANTHIAS

What? You mean I can't tell
that really funny one . . .

DIONYSUS

I suppose so—
but don't say anything about the bit.

XANTHIAS

What bit?

DIONYSUS

The bit about how you need to shift your load
to take a piss.

10

XANTHIAS

Not even this one—
“Here I am transporting such a load
if I get no relief I may explode.”

[10]

DIONYSUS

Please, please, don't say that one—
not unless I'm sick and need to throw up.

XANTHIAS

Then what's the point of my being here like this?
Why do I get to carry all the heavy baggage
if I can't tell the usual porter jokes—you know,
the ones Ameipsias and Phrynichus
and Lycias, too, in all their comedies
provide the slave who carries all the bags.

20

DIONYSUS

Just don't. Those jokes are all so feeble—
when I have to watch a play and hear them
by the time I leave I've aged at least a year.

XANTHIAS *[striking a heroic tragic pose]*

Alas, for my neck beneath this triply damned yoke.
I suffer all this pressure and can't tell my joke.

[20]

DIONYSUS

It's an outrage, sheer insolence, that I,
Dionysus, son of Winejar, have to walk like this,
sweating along so he can ride at ease
without a care and carrying no load.

XANTHIAS

What!?

30

Aren't I carrying the load?

DIONYSUS

How can you be?

You're riding on your ass.

XANTHIAS

I'm loaded down.

All this stuff . . .

DIONYSUS

What do you mean by that?

XANTHIAS

What I just said carries lots of weight.

DIONYSUS

Isn't the donkey carrying our load?

XANTHIAS

No, no way. Not the load I'm holding.

DIONYSUS

How come?

How can you be carrying anything at all
when someone else is carrying you?

XANTHIAS

I've no idea.

But my shoulder's falling off.

[30]

DIONYSUS

All right, then.

Since you claim the donkey's useless to you,
why not take your turn and carry it?

40

XANTHIAS

What a wretched life!
I should have gone away to fight at sea—
then I'd be free and I'd have told you straight
what you could do with that ass of yours.

DIONYSUS

Get down, you useless idiot! We're there—
by the door I'm aiming for, my first stop.

[Dionysus knocks very aggressively on the door and calls out in a very imperious tone]

Hey, in there! Doorman! I'm summoning you.

[The door opens and Hercules steps out, wearing a lion's skin and carrying a club. He's amazed that someone is dressed up to resemble him]

HERCULES

Who's banging on this door—smashing at it
like some wild centaur. My god, what's this?

[Hercules inspects Dionysus' outfit and starts to laugh uproariously]

DIONYSUS

Hey, my boy . . .

XANTHIAS

What?

DIONYSUS

Didn't you see?

XANTHIAS

See what?

50 [40]

DIONYSUS

How scared he was of me?

XANTHIAS

Yes, by god, he was,
scared you're nuts.

HERCULES [*doubling up with laughter*]

By holy Demeter,
I can't stop laughing. I'll try biting my lip.
No, no use. I can't stop laughing at him.

DIONYSUS

Come here, my good man. I need something from you.

HERCULES [*still laughing out of control*]

I can't help myself—he's so ridiculous.
Seeing that lion skin above that yellow dress.
What's going on? Do people with large clubs
now walk around in leather booties?
Where on earth do you think you're going?

60

DIONYSUS

I've done naval service under Cleisthenes.

HERCULES

At that sea battle?

DIONYSUS

Yes—and sunk enemy ships,
twelve or thirteen of them.

[50]

HERCULES

Just the two of you?

DIONYSUS

Yes, by Apollo, we did.

XANTHIAS

Then I woke up.

DIONYSUS

I was on board with Euripides' *Andromeda*,
reading to myself aloud, when suddenly
a huge urge seized my heart. You've no idea how strong.

HERCULES

An urge? How big was it?

DIONYSUS

The size of Molon—tiny.

HERCULES

For a woman?

DIONYSUS

No, no.

HERCULES

A young lad, then?

DIONYSUS

Certainly not.

HERCULES

Well, then, a man?

DIONYSUS

Ugh!

70

HERCULES

Did you grab hold of your Cleisthenes?

DIONYSUS

Don't mock me, brother. I'm not doing so well,
tormented by such hot desires.

HERCULES

Tell me,
my little brother, what's it like?

DIONYSUS

I can't explain.
But I'll try to show you by analogy.
Have you ever had a craving for some stew?

[60]

HERCULES

For stew? In my life maybe ten thousand times.

DIONYSUS

Is that explanation clear enough to you?
Or shall I try some other way?

HERCULES

Not about stew!
That I understand completely.

DIONYSUS

Well then,

80

that's how much I'm eaten up with my desire
for Euripides.

HERCULES

Even when he's dead?

DIONYSUS

So no one's going to talk me out of it—
I have to find him.

HERCULES

Right down in Hell?

DIONYSUS

Or even lower,
by god, if there's such a place.

[70]

HERCULES

What's the point of that?

DIONYSUS

I need a clever poet. There's none around.
The ones we've got are all so lousy.

HERCULES

What? Isn't Iophon still up there?

DIONYSUS

He's the only good one left—if he's any good.
I'm not really sure if that's the case. 90

HERCULES

If you've got to take a playwright back,
why not Sophocles? He's better than Euripides.

DIONYSUS

Not till I get Iophon all by himself,
without his father, Sophocles, so I can test
the metal of his poetry. Besides, Euripides
is such a rascal he may try to flee Hades
and come with me. But Sophocles was nice—
easygoing while on earth and down here, too.

[80]

HERCULES

What about Agathon? Where's he?

DIONYSUS

He's left us—
a fine poet lamented by his friends.

100

HERCULES
Where's he gone?

DIONYSUS
Off to feast with saints.

HERCULES
And Xenocles?

DIONYSUS
O by god, may he drop dead!

HERCULES
Well then, Pythangelos?

XANTHIAS
What about *me*?
In pain all this time—my shoulder's sore as hell.

HERCULES
Surely you've other artsy-fartsy types—
thousands of tragic poets—all of them
way more wordy than Euripides? [90]

DIONYSUS
No, no—
all chatterboxes, twittering swallows in a music hall,
mere foliage—disgraces to the artist's craft.
Once they get a chance to stage their plays,
to crap all over tragedy, they disappear. 110
If you looked you'd never find one playwright,
someone creative who could well declaim
a worthy sentiment.

HERCULES
That word "creative"—
what's it mean?

DIONYSUS
Someone poetical enough
to give utterance to something grand,
something like

[Dionysus strikes a tragic pose]

“the sky, Zeus’ pied-a-terre,”
“the foot of time,” or this—“a mind that will not swear
on sacred offerings but a perjured tongue
that’s false with no sense of its perfidy.”

[100]

120

HERCULES

You like that stuff?

DIONYSUS

Like it? I’m crazy about it.

HERCULES

I swear it’s all bullshit—and you know it.

DIONYSUS

Now, now, don’t try to tell me what to think,
not with tragedy. You’re no expert there.

HERCULES

I still say it sounds like total rubbish.

DIONYSUS

Why not teach me how to stuff my guts?

XANTHIAS

WHAT ABOUT ME??!!!!

DIONYSUS

That’s the reason I’ve come here
and dressed like you—so you can fill me in,
in case I need to know, about this place—
who welcomed you down here, who’d you meet
that time you went down after Cerberus.
Tell me about the harbours, resting places,
bakeries and brothels, water fountains,
the cities, highways, all the detours,
the local customs and the fine hotels,
the ones with fewest bugs.

130 [110]

XANTHIAS

Still no word of me.

HERCULES

O you valiant heart! Are you man enough

to venture down below?

DIONYSUS

Forget my courage.
Show me the highway, the shortest one there is,
that takes me directly down to Hades.
Don't prattle on about the temperature—
and say it's way too hot or cold for me.

140

HERCULES

Let's see . . . what should I mention first of all?
Which one? Hmmm. You could try a stool and rope—
you could just hang yourself.

[120]

DIONYSUS

Stop it right there.
That way gives me a choking feeling.

HERCULES

There's a straight short cut, well traveled, too—
with pestle and mortar . . .

DIONYSUS

You mean hemlock.

HERCULES

That's it!

DIONYSUS

Too cold—too much like winter. Right away
the shins get frozen solid.

HERCULES

All right, then.
You want me to tell you how to get there fast.

150

DIONYSUS

Yes, by god. I'm not one to take a hike.

HERCULES

How about a stroll to Kerameikos . . .

DIONYSUS

Okay, what then?

HERCULES

Climb up the tower there—
right to the very top . . .

DIONYSUS

And then what?

[130]

HERCULES

Take a look at the torch race starting up—
when the spectators all yell out “They’re off!”
then off you go as well.

DIONYSUS

Off? Where to?

HERCULES

Down.

DIONYSUS

No, I can’t take that road. I’d pulverize
both rissole wrappers of my brain.

HERCULES

What’s left?

160

The road you used.

HERCULES

O, an enormous journey.
At the very start you come to a vast lake—
immense and bottomless.

DIONYSUS

How do I get across?

HERCULES

In a tiny boat—miniscule—like this [*indicating the size*].
An ancient sailor takes you for a fee—
two obols.

[140]

DIONYSUS

Two obols? It’s amazing
what two obols can buy anywhere.
How come it’s here in Hades, too?

HERCULES

That was Theseus.
He started it. Once past the lake you’ll find snakes.
You’ll see thousands of them, horrific monsters.

170

DIONYSUS

Don't keep trying to scare me. That won't work.
There's no way you'll get me to turn back.

HERCULES

Then a huge sewer, always full of liquid turds—
and lying in it anyone who harmed a guest
or screwed a lad and then took back the cash,
or smacked his mother, punched his father's jaw,
or swore false oaths, or else had copied out
a speech of Morsimus.

[150]

DIONYSUS

By god, with them in the shit
should lie whoever learned a war dance by Cinesias.

HERCULES

Next the breath of flutes will sound around you.
You'll see the finest light, just like in Athens,
and myrtle groves, with happy men and women
gathered there to celebrate and clap their hands.

180

DIONYSUS

So who are they?

HERCULES

Those are the initiates,
the ones who celebrate the mysteries.

XANTHIAS

Then, by god, in these mysteries I play the ass.
I'll not stand for this a moment longer.

[160]

[Xanthias dismounts and starts to unload the baggage he has been carrying]

HERCULES

Those ones will tell you all you need to know.
These initiates live closest to the road
which takes you to the doors of Pluto's place.
And so, my brother, I bid you fond farewell.

190

DIONYSUS

Good bye—god keep you healthy, too.

[Hercules exits back through the door. Dionysus turns to Xanthias, who has just about finished putting down all the luggage he has been carrying.]

You there—take up the baggage once again!

XANTHIAS

Before I've put it down?

DIONYSUS

Yes, and hurry up.

[Enter a solemn funeral cortege carrying a dead man towards Hades]

XANTHIAS

Come on, I'm begging you. Hire one of them—
someone carrying the corpse. That's why they're here.

DIONYSUS

And if I don't find anyone?

XANTHIAS

I'll do it.

DIONYSUS

Fair enough. All right, they're bringing out a corpse [170]
You there . . . you stiff . . . I'm talking to you . . . Hallo!

[The corpse suddenly sits up straight]

You want to take a little luggage down to hell? 200

CORPSE

How much?

DIONYSUS

This stuff here.

CORPSE

Will you pay two drachmas?

DIONYSUS

My god, no. Less than that.

CORPSE

Then go away.

DIONYSUS

Hang on, my dear fellow. Can't we haggle?

CORPSE

If you don't pay two drachmas, forget it.

DIONYSUS

How about nine obols?

CORPSE

No bloody way!

I'd rather you shoved me back to life again.

[Corpse lies down and the funeral procession moves away]

DIONYSUS

What a pompous boor!

XANTHIAS

To hell with him—

I'll take the stuff myself.

[Xanthias starts loading himself with the baggage once again]

DIONYSUS

That's my good man—

a loyal and worthy slave. Let's get that boat

[Enter Charon rowing his small boat across the stage]

CHARON

Ahoy there! Coming alongside.

[180]

XANTHIAS

What's this?

DIONYSUS

This?

210

By god, it's the lake Hercules talked about.

And I see the boat . . .

XANTHIAS

You're right. Thanks to Poseidon.

This must be Charon.

DIONYSUS

Ahoy there, Charon . . .

Greetings, Charon . . . Charon, halloooo!

CHARON

Who's seeks a rest from work and trouble?
Who's heading for Fields of Forgetfulness,
Never-never land, the Cerberians,
the Ravens and Tartarus.

DIONYSUS

That's me.

CHARON

Then jump aboard.

DIONYSUS

Where do you put in?
The Ravens? Is that a stop?

CHARON

Yes, by god—
a special stop just for you. Get in.

220

DIONYSUS [*to Xanthias*]

All right, my lad, hop in.

CHARON

I won't take the slave—
not unless he fought at sea to save his skin.

[190]

XANTHIAS

Not me, by god, no way. My eyes were bad.

CHARON

Then you must make a detour round the lake.

XANTHIAS

Where do I wait for you?

CHARON

At Wuthering Rock—
right by the rest stop.

DIONYSUS

You got that?

XANTHIAS

I got that.

[picking up the bags]

Why am I so unlucky? When we began
I must've really pissed somebody off.

CHARON *[to Dionysus]*

Sit down there—at that oar.

[Dionysus sits on one of the oars]

Anyone else?
Hurry up—all aboard! What are you doing?

230

DIONYSUS

What am I doing? I'm sitting on this oar.
That's what you ordered me to do.

CHARON

Come on, fatso—park your butt right here.

DIONYSUS *[moving off the oar]*

There!

[200]

CHARON

Can you pick up the oar? Stretch your arms.

DIONYSUS

Like this?

CHARON

Don't be such a fool. Set your foot there.
Now pull the oar with all your force.

DIONYSUS

How can I?
I've had no practice. I'm no sailor.
And besides, I'm not from Salamis.
How am I supposed to row a boat?

240

CHARON

It's not hard. You'll hear lovely melodies
once you make the effort.

DIONYSUS

Songs? Whose songs?

CHARON

The amazing music of the swan frogs.

DIONYSUS

All right, then. Get the tempo going.

CHARON

Yo ho, heave ho. Yo ho heave ho.

[As the small boat begins to move, the Chorus of Frogs is heard from off stage]

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax

Brekekekex koax koax.

[210]

Children of the marsh and lake
harmonious song now sweetly make,
our own enchanting melodies
koax koax.

250

The songs we sang for Nysa's lord,
for Dionysus, son of Zeus,
in Limnai at the Feast of Jars
as people in their drunken glee
thronged into our sanctuary.

Brekekekex koax koax.

[220]

DIONYSUS *[still rowing]*

I'm starting to get a pain in the ass
from all your koax koax.

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax.

260

DIONYSUS

Not that you give a damn about it.

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax.

DIONYSUS

Piss off—and take that koax koax with you.
Nothing but koax koax.

CHORUS OF FROGS

Yes, and for us that's fine
you meddling fool—so asinine.
Music-loving Muses love us too

as does goat-footed Pan [230]
playing music on melodious pipes.
Apollo as he strums his lyre 270
loves us and what we sing,
for in the marshy waters here
we grow the reeds that bridge his string.
Brekekekex koax koax.

DIONYSUS *[still rowing]*
Well, I'm getting blisters and a sweaty bum.
Next time I bend down it's going to speak . . .

[As Dionysus leans forward for the next stroke he lifts his rear end up in the air to fart at the Frog Chorus, but their next line drowns out the sound]

CHORUS OF FROGS
Brekekekex koax koax.

DIONYSUS
Stop it, you music-loving tribe! [240]

CHORUS OF FROGS
No, no. We'll sing on all the more—
if we've ever hopped on shore 280
on sunny days through weeds and rushes
rejoicing in our lovely songs
as we dive and dive once more,
or as from Zeus' rain we flee
to sing our varied harmonies
at the bottom of the marsh,
our bubble-splashing melodies.

DIONYSUS
Brekekekex koax koax— [250]
from you I'm catching your disease!

CHORUS OF FROGS
If that's the case, you'll never please. 290
That's hard on us.

DIONYSUS
But worse for me—
I may blow up here as I row.

CHORUS OF FROGS
Brekekekex koax koax

DIONYSUS

Go on. Keep croaking. I don't care.

CHORUS OF FROGS

We'll croak on 'til our throats wear out.

We'll croak all day.

[260]

DIONYSUS

Brekekekex koax koax

You never beat me in this play!

CHORUS OF FROGS

And you've no chance to win your way,
not matched with us.

DIONYSUS

And you've no hope outdoing me.

300

No, no. If I must I'll yell all day,

koaxing you to get my way—

Brekekekex koax koax

[Dionysus listens for a response from the Chorus, but there is none]

You see. Sooner or later I was going to win—
and make you stop your harsh koaxing din.

CHARON

Stop it. Ship that oar alongside here.

Get out . . . and pay your fare.

DIONYSUS

Two obols? Here.

[270]

[Dionysus pays Charon, who rows his way off stage. Dionysus starts looking around for Xanthias]

Xanthias! Hey, Xanthias!

XANTHIAS *[offstage]*

Over here!

DIONYSUS *[still calling]*

Come here!

[Xanthias appears with the baggage but without the donkey]

XANTHIAS

Greetings, master.

DIONYSUS

All right, what have we got?

XANTHIAS

Nothing but filthy muck—mud and darkness.

310

DIONYSUS

Did you see the men who beat their fathers—
or perjurers—the ones he mentioned?

XANTHIAS

You mean you don't?

DIONYSUS [*looking at the audience*]

By Poseidon, yes I do!

Now I see them. So what do we do next?

XANTHIAS

We'd better get away from here.
Hercules mentioned to us it's the place
where wild beast prowl.

DIONYSUS

To Hell with him!

He was talking big to make me scared.
He saw I was a fighter, and he's jealous.
No one's more full of it than Hercules.
But I'm keen now for some adventure,
some exploit worthy of this expedition.

[280]

320

XANTHIAS

Of course you are. What's that? I hear a noise.

DIONYSUS

What? Where is it?

XANTHIAS

Behind us.

DIONYSUS [*pushing Xanthias*]

Get behind me.

XANTHIAS

No, it's up ahead.

DIONYSUS [*pushing Xanthias again*]
You get in front.

XANTHIAS
My god!
Now I see it. Ooooh, a monstrous beast!

DIONYSUS [*cowering behind Xanthias*]
What's it like?

XANTHIAS
It's weird—all sorts of shapes.
Now it's an ox—no, no, a jackass—
now it's a woman—what a gorgeous babe!

[290]

DIONYSUS
Where is she?
I'll go say hello.

XANTHIAS
Hold on a minute!
She's not a woman any more. Now she's a bitch!

330

DIONYSUS [*terrified*]
It's Empusa!!

XANTHIAS
Her whole face is on fire!

DIONYSUS
Her legs—does she have one made of bronze?

XANTHIAS
Yes!
By Poseidon, yes! The other's made of cow shit.
And that's no lie.

DIONYSUS
Where can I run?

XANTHIAS [*imitating Dionysus*]
Where can I run?

DIONYSUS [*appealing the audience*]
O holy man, save me—so we can drink together.

XANTHIAS

We're screwed! Oh, lord Hercules!

DIONYSUS

Don't call me that!
I'm begging you, my man—don't say that name!

XANTHIAS

Then Dionysus . . .

DIONYSUS

That's worse than Hercules. [300]

XANTHIAS [*to the imaginary monster*]

Beat it! Shoo! Come on, master.

DIONYSUS

What's going on? 340

XANTHIAS

Cheer up—we've come through everything just fine.
Now like Hegelochus we can recite
"After the storm I see the seals are calm."
Empousa's left.

DIONYSUS

You swear?

XANTHIAS

Cross my heart.

DIONYSUS

Swear again.

XANTHIAS

Yes, by Zeus.

DIONYSUS

Swear it one more time.

XANTHIAS

By Zeus, I swear.

DIONYSUS

That was a close shave—
looking at her almost made me puke.

XANTHIAS

You were so terrified you stained your pants.

DIONYSUS [*in a tragic tone*]

Woe, woe, why do such ills afflict me so?
Which god shall I accuse of thus destroying me?

350 [310]

XANTHIAS

How about Zeus' airy *pied-a-terre* or the foot of time?

[*The sound of music being played on the pipes comes from inside the house*]

XANTHIAS

Listen!

DIONYSUS

What is it?

XANTHIAS

You don't hear that?

DIONYSUS

What?

XANTHIAS

A tune played on the flute.

DIONYSUS [*continuing his tragic rant*]

Ah yes, and now
the scent of torches just came wafting o'er me,
torches of mystery . . .

XANTHIAS [*interrupting*]

Shhhh. Let's squat down here—
keep quiet and pay attention.

[*The Chorus of Initiates is heard offstage*]

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Iacchus, O Iacchus,
Iacchus, O Iacchus.

XANTHUS

Master, this is it—the initiates
doing their chant, the ones he talked about—

360

Diagoras' hymn to Iacchus.

[320]

DIONYSUS

It sounds like that to me. We'd best shut up,
so we find out for sure.

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Iacchus, living here
in your highly honoured shrines—
Iacchus, O Iacchus
in this meadow come to dance
with partners in your mystery.
Shake the garland round your head,
the fruit-filled myrtle, come and tread
our playful rite's unbridled steps
where the Graces join in, too—
our pure and sacred dance and song,
the chant of your initiate throng.

370 [330]

XANTHIAS

O holy noble daughter of Demeter,
I just smelt roast pork—how sweet a smell that is.

DIONYSUS

If you keep quiet, you may just get a slice.

[Enter the Chorus of Initiates carrying torches]

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Awake the blazing torches in your hands!

[340]

CHORUS OF INITIATES

O Iacchus, Iacchus—with us you stand
light-bearing star in our nocturnal rite.
For now the meadow blazes light,
old men's knees will move again
as they dance off their ancient pain,
the lengthy cycle of their aged plight
in this your ceremonial night.
As your radiant torches blaze
bring to this flowery marshy place,
the forward march of all the young
that constitute your choral throng,
O sacred one.

380

[350]

390

CHORUS LEADER

Let all those stand in silence here
 and keep their distance from our dance—
 all those who have no sure command
 of ritual words and purposes,
 who have not purified their hearts,
 the ones who've never seen or danced
 the noble Muses' ritual songs,
 or played their part in Bacchic rites
 of bull-devouring Cratinus,
 or like words fit for foolish clowns 400
 when such words are not suitable—
 or anyone who just can't turn away
 from fights and hateful party strife,
 who cannot be a genial citizen,
 easygoing with his countrymen,
 but lights and fans the flames of war,
 ambitious to advance himself, [360]
 whoever guides our state through storms
 and is corrupted by some bribe,
 betrays our watch posts and our ships 410
 or from Aegina smuggles goods,
 like that wretch Thorycion,
 our customs agent who shipped off
 illicit stuff to Epidaurus—
 oar pads and cloth for sails and pitch,
 or who persuades some other man
 to send supplies to hostile ships,
 or anyone opposing Hecate
 in dithyrambic choruses,
 or any politician setting out 420
 to pare back pay our poets get
 because they mock him in these rites,
 ancient rites of Dionysus.

I say to all such people, and I say again—
 and for a third time I state once more—
 stand back from our choral mysteries. [370]
 But those now here begin the songs,
 the dances lasting all night long,
 as fits our ceremonial throng.

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Now each one boldly marches on 430
 into the meadow's flowery lap,
 and each one stamps the ground—
 we joke, make fun, we mock,

our bellies crammed with breakfast food.

CHORUS LEADER

Move on, now—but see you praise
the saving goddess in a noble way,
as you sing out our melodies.

She says she acts to save our land
from season unto season,
against the wishes of Thorycion.

[380]

440

Come now, cry aloud another chant
for goddess Demeter, our harvest queen,
a celebration made in sacred song.

CHORUS OF INITIATES

O Demeter, queen of our sacred rites, stand with us here
preserve us now, your chorus. Let me play in safety,
let me dance all day, tell lots of really funny jokes,
and offer many serious reflections, too.

[390]

Then, as befits your ceremonial rites, let me,
with my ridicule and fun, take off first prize,
let me wear the wreath, garland of victory.

450

CHORUS LEADER

Come now, with your singing summon here
that lovely god, our partner in this dance.

CHORUS

Widely honoured Iacchus,
creator of the sweetest joyful song,
come here with us to Demeter,
show us how you move along
this lengthy way with so much ease.

[400]

Iacchus, lover of the dance,
escort me forward as I prance.

In your playful penny-pinching mood
you've torn my tiny dancing shoes,
you've ripped my dress to shreds—
Iacchus, you've found a way
for all of us to dance and play
what more, we never have to pay.

460

O Iacchus, lover of the dance

escort me forward as I prance.

What's more, as I just glanced aside
around me here, I saw a girl,
a lovely partner in the dance—
her scanty dress was ripped in two,
I saw a nipple peeking through.

[410]
470

Iacchus, lover of the dance,
escort me forward as I prance.

DIONYSUS

Hey, I'm always keen to enjoy myself.
I'd like to dance with her.

XANTHIAS

Me, too.

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Would you like to join us now in making fun
of Archedemos, who at seven years old
was toothless, no genuine Athenian teeth.
And now he plays big shot in politics
among the dead above—the best there is
at double dealing and corruption.
And Cleisthenes, I hear, still picks his ass
and rips his cheeks apart among the tombstones,
blubbering over his dead lover Sabinos.
And Callias, they say, son of the man
who used to bugger his own horses,
has fights at sea, naval entanglements,
his arse hole covered by a lion skin.

[420]
480
[430]

DIONYSUS [*approaching the Leader of the Chorus*]

Could you please inform the two of us
where Pluto lives when he's at home down here?
We're strangers in these parts. We've just arrived.

490

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

No need to travel very far from here—
so don't ask me again. You should know
you're there—right at this very door.

[440]

DIONYSUS [*to Xanthias*]

All right, lad, pick up the bags again.

XANTHIAS [*grumbling as he picks up the luggage*]
What's this all mean—the same old storyline,
with Corinth, son of Zeus . . . all this baggage.

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Keep up the dance
along the round path sacred to our goddess, 500
to the flower-bearing grove—let's play
with those who join this festival,
the one our goddess so adores.
I'll join the women and the girls
who dance to the goddess all night long,
the ones who bear the sacred light.
Let's move on into flowery meadows, [450]
the rose-filled fields, and worship there
the way we always do, with song and dance,
where blessed Fates assemble, too. 510

DIONYSUS

Let's see—what style do I use at this point [460]
to knock upon the door? Which one to use?
What's the local style of knocking here?

XANTHIAS

Stop wasting time. Try chewing on the door—
act like Hercules. You've got his height and might.

DIONYSUS [*knocking*]

You in there! Doorkeeper!

AEACUS [*from inside*]

Who is it?

DIONYSUS

It's great Hercules!

[*Aeacus bursts through the door and grabs Dionysus very roughly*]

AEACUS

O you abominable, you shameless reckless wretch—
villain, villain, damned smiling villain—
the man who made off with Cerberus my dog!
You grabbed him by the throat and throttled him, 520
then took off on the run, while I stood guard.
Now you're caught—black-hearted Stygian rocks, [470]
and blood-dripping peaks of Acheron

will hold you down. Roaming hounds of Cocytus
will gnaw your guts to bits—Echnida, too,
and she's a hundred heads. The Tartesian eel
will chew your lungs, your kidneys bleed
from entrails Tithrasian Gorgons rip apart.
I'll set out hot foot in their direction.

*[Aeacus lets go of Dionysus, who drops to the ground in terror. Exit Aeacus back into the house.
Dionysus lifts his tunic and inspects his underpants]*

XANTHIAS

What have you done?

DIONYSUS

I've made an offering. Call the god.

530

XANTHIAS

You're being ridiculous. Get up. Move it,
before some stranger spots you.

[480]

DIONYSUS

I'm going to faint.
Bring the sponge here—set it on my heart.

[Xanthias rummages through the bags and finds a large sponge]

XANTHIAS

I've found the sponge! Here—you can do it.

[Dionysus takes the sponge and begins to clean up his crotch with it]

XANTHIAS

Where are you putting that sponge? O golden gods,
you keep your heart in there?

DIONYSUS

It was scared—
it ran off to my lower bowel.

XANTHIAS

Of all gods and men
no one's more cowardly than you.

DIONYSUS

Me?
How can I be when I asked you for the sponge?

Another man would not have asked, as I did.

540

XANTHIAS

What would he have done?

DIONYSUS

Well, a coward
would have lain there and stunk up the place.
But I stood up—what's more, I wiped myself.

[490]

XANTHIAS

By Poseidon, a valiant act.

DIONYSUS

By Zeus. I think it was.
Weren't you scared shitless by his angry words,
by all those threats?

XANTHIAS

By Zeus, I never thought of them.

DIONYSUS

All right then, since you're so brave, so valiant,
you can be me. Take this club and lion skin.
If you're got the guts, I'll trade places with you.
I'll carry all the baggage.

XANTHIAS

All right.
I've got no choice. Quick, give me that.

550

[Xanthias takes the club and puts on the lion skin]

XANTHIAS *[in the grand style]*

Now gaze upon the Xanthian Hercules—
see if I turn coward and act like you.

[500]

DIONYSUS

No, by god, you'll well deserve a whipping.
Come on, then, I'll pick up the bags.

[Dionysus starts to pick up a few of the smaller pieces. A Servant enters through the door]

SERVANT

Have you come back, my dearest Hercules?

Come on in. Once the goddess heard you'd come
she had us baking bread loaves right away,
boiling up pea soup—two or three cauldrons full,
roasting an entire ox, baking honey cakes
and cookies. So do come in.

560

XANTHIAS

That's really nice,
but I'm afraid . . .

SERVANT

I won't let you get away—
by Apollo, no. She's stewing bird meat,
toasting fresh desserts, mixing sweetest wines.
Please come in.

[510]

XANTHIAS

I appreciate it, but . . .

SERVANT

You can't be serious. I won't let you leave.
There's a lovely flute girl in there, just for you—
two or three dancing girls, as well.

XANTHIAS

What's that?
Did you say dancing girls?

SERVANT

Young and in full bloom—
all freshly plucked. So come on in. Right now
the cook's all ready to produce the fish.
The table's being brought in.

570

XANTHIAS

You go on back.
First, tell those dancing girls inside I'm coming.

[To Dionysus]

You, slave, follow me. And bring the baggage.

[520]

DIONYSUS

Hey, hold on a minute. All this pretence,
you can't be taking it so seriously.
The fact I dressed you up as Hercules—
that was just fun. Don't play the fool with me.

Pick up these bags again and bring them in.

XANTHIAS

What? You're not intending to take back from me
what you gave in person?

580

DIONYSUS

You bet I am.

Take off that lion skin.

XANTHIAS

I want witnesses—

I entrust my law suit to the gods.

DIONYSUS

What gods?

To think that you, a slave and mortal, too,
could play Hercules, Alcmene's son—
so arrogant and stupid.

[530]

XANTHIAS

All right, all right.

Have it your way, then. Take the costume.
Perhaps some day the gods'll make you need me.

[Xanthias hands the club and lion skin to Dionysus]

CHORUS

There's a man with brains,
with keen intelligence—
someone who's sailed about a bit
and always rolls himself around
to the right side of the ship.
He's not one to stand transfixed
like some image made in paint
or frozen solid like a stone.
To move away from where one stands
to places much more comfortable—
that indicates a clever man,
a born Theramenes.

590

[540]

600

DIONYSUS

Now that would be extremely funny
to see Xanthias, my slave, lying at ease
enjoying bed linen from Milesia,
as he smooches with some dancing girl.

He asks me for a pot to piss in—
but I, looking at him straight, grab him hard
right by his cucumber.

[Dionysus laughs at the thought, but then reconsiders]

But then he'd see me
and, being a rascal, sock me on the jaw.
He'd knock my front teeth out for sure.

[Pandokeutria, a landlady, enters through the door, looks at Dionysus, and calls back through the doorway]

PANDOEUTRIA

Plathane, Plathane, come out here.

610

That fellow's back who came to our hotel
and ate up all our bread, all sixteen loaves.

[550]

[Enter Plathane, another landlady]

PLATHANE

My god, that's the one.

XANTHIAS

Oh, oh. Someone's in trouble.

PANDOEUTRIA

And twenty boiled hams afterwards as well—
at half an obol each.

XANTHIAS

Now he's in for it.

PANDOEUTRIA

And lots of garlic, too.

DIONYSUS

My good women, you jest.
You don't know what you're saying.

PANDOEUTRIA

O yes, we do.
You thought I wouldn't know you any more
because you've got those little booties on.
What else was there? I haven't said a word
about the pickled fish.

620

PLATHANE

You left out
all the fresh cheese, by god, the scoundrel ate.
He gobbled up the baskets, too.

[560]

PANDOEUTRIA

To top it all,
when I tallied up his bill, he just looked at me
and yelled, a massive roar right in my face.

XANTHIAS

That's just like him. He does that everywhere.

PANDOEUTRIA

Then he pulled out his sword—he looked insane.

PLATHANE

My god, you poor dear!

PANDOEUTRIA

We were both terrified.
Somehow we ran up fast onto the shelf,
and he took off, grabbing up the mats.

630

XANTHIAS

Well, that's exactly how he operates.

PANDOEUTRIA

We've got to deal with him somehow. I know—
go call my patron Cleon.

PLATHANE

If you meet him,
get Hyperbolos, as well. We'll fix this fellow.

[570]

PANDOEUTRIA

You wretched greedy swine—I'd be so happy
to smash your molars with a rock, those teeth
which gobbled down my stuff.

DIONYSUS

That's really nice—
and I'd like to dump you in a deep ravine.

PLATHANE

I could take a sickle and slice that gullet
which wolfed down all my tripe. Instead of that,
I'll get Cleon to draw up a charge,
so we can fish food out of him right here.

640

[Exit Plathane and Pandokeutria]

DIONYSUS

Now, may I die the nastiest of deaths,
my little Xanthias, if I'm not fond of you . . .

XANTHIAS

I know what you're thinking. Just stop right there.
Don't say a word. I'm Hercules again—
but I won't do it.

[580]

DIONYSUS

Dear little Xanthias,
don't say such things.

XANTHIAS

How could I be Hercules—
remember I'm a slave and mortal, too.

DIONYSUS

I know you're angry—you've a right to be.
But even if you hit me, I won't criticize.
And if in future I take anything from you,
may I be chopped down root and branch.
Let me die in the worst way possible—
me, my wife, and kids—and Archedemus, too—
the man with clammy eyes.

650

XANTHIAS

On those conditions I accept your oath.

[Xanthias and Dionysus exchange the lion skin and club once again]

CHORUS

Since you've taken up the skin,
the one you had before,
your task is now to start again,
to reinvigorate yourself—
once more put on that dreadful stare,
recall the god you imitate.
If you get caught in foolish talk

[590]

660

or squeak out squeals of fear,
you'll be compelled a second time
to carry all the bags.

XANTHIAS

Men, the advice you give me is not bad.
I was thinking the same thing myself.
What's more, if all this turns out a success,
he'll try to take this back from me again.
I know that for a fact. But I'll make myself
a manly man—with a gaze like mustard.
I need to do that—for just as I thought
I hear the sound of scraping by the door.

670

[600]

[Enter Aeacus with servants]

AEACUS

Tie up this dog thief. Get a move on, too—
so we can punish him. Be quick about it.

DIONYSUS

Oh, oh. Someone's in trouble now.

XANTHIAS

What the hell!
You stay away from me!

AEACUS

O ho, you're fighting back!

[calling inside the house]

Ditylas, Sceblias, Pandocus—outside!—
come here and punch this fellow out.

680

[Servants appear and begin to fight Xanthias]

DIONYSUS

It's shameful, a complete disgrace—
the way he hits them back—and more than that—
he steals.

[610]

AEACUS

That's shocking.

DIONYSUS

It's even worse.
It's scandalous and dreadful.

XANTHIAS

Now, by god,
I'm prepared to die if I was ever here
before today, or stole a thing from you
that's worth a hair. What's more, I'll make an offer,
like a true gentleman—take this slave of mine
and torture him. If you find out from him
I've done wrong, then take me out and kill me.

690

AEACUS

How should I torture him?

XANTHIAS

All the ways there are.
Tie him to a ladder, hang him up,
whip him with nails, twist him on the rack,
strip off skin, fill his nose with vinegar,
load bricks on him—do everything you can.
Just don't flog him with fresh onions or a leek.

[620]

AEACUS

That offer's fair. So if I beat the slave
and cripple him, I'll pay for damages.

XANTHIAS

Not to me. Just take him off for torture.

700

AEACUS

No. I'll torture him right here, so he'll confess
before your very eyes.

[To Dionysus]

Put down that load.
And hurry up. Don't give me any lies.

DIONYSUS

I here proclaim no one should torture me.
I'm an immortal god. If you do so,
you'll have yourself to blame.

AEACUS

What are you saying?

[630]

DIONYSUS

I'm saying I'm Dionysus, an immortal,
a son of Zeus—this man here's a slave.

AEACUS

You hear that?

XANTHIAS

I hear what he claims to be—
all the more good reason for flogging him.
If he's a god, he won't feel a thing.

710

DIONYSUS

You're right.
And since you also claim that you're a god,
why don't you take as many blows as me?

XANTHIAS

Fair enough. Then whichever of the two
you see bursting into tears or flinching
as he's whipped—you'll know he's not the god.

AEACUS

You're a fine gentleman—that's obvious.
You stand for justice. All right—the two of you,
take off your clothes.

[640]

[Xanthias and Dionysus remove their clothes and get down on all fours in preparation for the whipping. Aeacus produces a massive whip]

XANTHIAS

How will you judge this?
How will you keep it fair?

AEACUS

That's easy.
I'll alternate the blows.

720

XANTHIAS

A fine suggestion.

AEACUS *[striking Xanthias]*

There!

XANTHIAS

Watch closely if I flinch or not.

AEACUS

But I just hit you.

XANTHIAS

By god, I didn't feel a thing.

AEACUS

All right. Now I'll lay into this one here.

[Aeacus strikes Dionysus]

DIONYSUS

When are you going to start my whipping?

AEACUS

I just did.

DIONYSUS

Why didn't I sneeze?

AEACUS

I haven't a clue..

Back to this one again.

XANTHIAS

Get on with it!

[Aeacus strikes Xanthias much harder than the first time]

XANTHIAS *[feeling the pain]*

Ahhhh!!!

AEACUS

What's that sound about? Did that blow hurt?

XANTHIAS

No, by god. I was just remembering
the feast for Hercules at Diomeia.

[650]

730

AEACUS

The man's a saint. All right, now this one's turn.

[Aeacus strikes Dionysus, again much harder than before]

DIONYSUS

Oooowww! Ahhh!!

AEACUS

What was that cry?

DIONYSUS

I see men on horseback.

AEACUS

Why are your eyes full of tears?

DIONYSUS

I smell onions.

AEACUS

You didn't feel a thing?

DIONYSUS

No, nothing—
nothing that bothered me.

AEACUS

All right, then,
back to this one here.

[Aeacus hits Xanthias really hard]

XANTHIAS

Aiiieeee!!

AEACUS

What was that?

XANTHIAS *[pretending he has a thorn in his hand]*

A little prickle. Pull it out.

AEACUS

What's going on?
Now it's this one's turn.

[Aeacus strikes Dionysus very hard]

DIONYSUS

Aaaiiii!! O Apollo,
who presides at Delphi and at Delos . . .

XANTHIAS

You hear that—the man's in pain.

DIONYSUS

No, I'm not.
I was remembering some poetry,
a verse from Hipponax.

740 [660]

XANTHIAS

You're getting nowhere.
Hit him on the ribs.

AEACUS

A good idea, by god.
Stick out that pot of yours.

[Aeacus hits Dionysus savagely on the ribs and stomach]

DIONYSUS

Aaaiiii! O Poseidon . . .

XANTHIAS

Someone's feeling pain.

DIONYSUS *[continuing to recite poetry]*

. . . you who command
Aegean headlands and the green-grey sea . . .

AEACUS

Holy Demeter, I can't sort this out.
Which one's the god? You'd best come inside.
My master Pluto will know who you are,
so will Persephone, his wife—they're gods.

[670]
750

DIONYSUS

Now you talking. I'd have liked it better
if you'd thought of that before these whippings.

[Dionysus and Xanthias and Aeacus go into the house leaving the Chorus on stage]

CHORUS

You Muses, enter now our sacred dance.

Enjoy our songs and gaze upon
 the massive crowds of people here,
 thousands of clever thinkers in their seats,
 in love with honour more than Cleophon,
 on whose snarling lips a Thracian swallow sits, [680]
 making an awful din—on that foreign leaf
 she squawks her nightingale's lament, 760
 for he'll soon be sentenced, sent to die
 although the jury's votes create a tie.

CHORUS LEADER

It's just and proper in this city
 our sacred chorus give advice and teach.
 So first it seems appropriate to us
 to free the citizens from inequalities—
 to ease their fears. So if a man slips up
 thanks to the wrestling tricks of Phrynicus,
 I say we should allow the ones who fall [690]
 to state their case, reform their evil ways. 770
 Besides that's no dishonour to our city.
 It would bring benefits. It's scandalous
 that those who fought a battle once at sea
 should instantly become Plataeans,
 masters instead of slaves. I don't deny
 this worked out well—in fact, I praise it.
 It's the only well-intentioned thing you did.
 But as well as this it stands to reason
 we should forget the single blow of fortune
 of those who fought so much at sea beside you, 780
 just like their fathers, your ethnic kinsmen—
 that's what they keep requesting. But you here,
 whom nature made the wisest of all people, [700]
 should drop your anger and make everyone
 who fights alongside us at sea a kinsman,
 a citizen. For if we are too proud,
 too puffed up with self-worth, especially now,
 when we're encircled by the sea's embrace,
 in future time we'll look like total fools.

If I've a keen sense of the life and style 790
 of someone who will someday cry in woe,
 this tiny irritating ape Cleigenes, [710]
 the most corrupt of all our laundry types,
 those noble men who cut the soap with ash,
 dilute the mix, and use Cimolian earth,
 won't be with us long. He knows it, too—

that's why he's not a man promoting peace.
 He knows that someday in a drunken fit
 he may well lose his staff of office,
 and, more than that, be stripped of all his clothes. 800
 This city, it often seems to me
 treats our best and worthiest citizens
 the way it does our old silver coins, [720]
 our new gold ones, as well. This money
 was never counterfeit—no, these coins
 appeared to be the finest coins of all,
 the only ones which bore the proper stamp.
 Everywhere among barbarians and Greeks
 they stood the test. But these we do not use.
 Instead we have our debased coins of bronze, 810
 poorly struck some days ago or yesterday.
 That's how we treat our finest citizens,
 the nobly born, our righteous men,
 our best and brightest, the ones well trained
 in music and the dance at the palaestra.
 Instead we use foreign bronze for everything—
 useless men from useless fathers, red heads, [730]
 men who've come here very recently—
 the sort the city at its most negligent
 would never use in earlier days, 820
 not even as a scapegoat. But now,
 you silly fools, it's time to change your ways.
 Use worthy people once again. You'll see—
 if you're successful, then you'll merit praise.
 And if you fail, well, you'll be a fine match
 for the tree you're hanging from. At any rate,
 should you slip up, that's what the wise will say.

[Enter Xanthias with a servant from the house]

SERVANT

By Zeus who saves us, that master of yours
 is a very cultured gentleman.

XANTHIAS

Of course, he is.
 The only things he knows are how to drink 830 [740]
 and dip his dink.

SERVANT

But not to beat you on the spot
 when they proved that you're the slave—and one

You mean me?
Every time I do that, I piss myself.

XANTHIAS

By Phoebus Apollo, give me your hand,
let me kiss you, and you kiss me.

850

[Notices a noise from inside the house]

Tell me,
by Zeus, patron of all flogged slaves like us,
what's going on inside the house, that noise,
all that yelling and abuse?

SERVANT

Oh that—
that's Euripides and Aeschylus.

XANTHIAS

Ah ha!

SERVANT

Big, big trouble's in the works down here
among the dead—a massive civil war.

[760]

XANTHIAS

What about?

SERVANT

There's a custom in these parts
that in the arts—the great and worthy ones—
the best man in his special area
gets all his meals for free at City Hall
in the chair of honour next to Pluto . . .

860

XANTHIAS

I get it.

SERVANT

. . . until someone else arrives
who has more skill than he does. At that point,
he has to yield his place.

XANTHIAS

But why would this
get Aeschylus upset?

SERVANT

Well, he had his chair,
the one for tragedy, as the finest
in that form of art.

XANTHIAS

Who's got it now?

[770]

SERVANT

When Euripides came down to Hades
he started showing off his rhetoric
to thieves, bag snatchers, parricides,
to all the ones who steal—and here in Hades
that's most of us. Well, they listened to him,
heard his counter-arguments, his twists and turns,
and went nuts for him. So they then proposed
he was the wisest of all men. With that,
Euripides got so worked up he claimed
that chair where Aeschylus sits down.

870

XANTHIAS

Didn't people throw stuff at him?

SERVANT

My god, no.
Quite the opposite. They all cried out
to have a trial set up which could find out
which of the two men was the wiser poet.

880

[780]

XANTHIAS

The crowd of scoundrels?

SERVANT

Yes, that bunch—
they made a din, by god—right up to heaven.

XANTHIAS

Didn't Aeschylus get some support?

SLAVE

It's like this audience—too few good men.

XANTHIAS

So what's Pluto planning to set up?

SLAVE

A contest— there's going to be a trial right here,
a test of skill.

XANTHIAS

What about Sophocles—
how come he didn't claim the poet's chair?

890

SLAVE

My god, he wouldn't. When he first arrived
he kissed Aeschylus, shook him by the hand,
and kept his distance from the chair of honour.
And now, according to Cleidemides,
he means to sit by as a substitute.
If Aeschylus wins out, he'll keep his place.
If not, in this contest of poetic skill
he says he'll fight on to the bitter end
against Euripides.

[790]

XANTHIAS

So this affair is on.

SLAVE

Yes, in a minute. In this very spot
some fairly weird things will be going on—
they're testing poetry with balance scales!

900

XANTHIAS

What?! They'll weigh tragedy in milligrams?

SERVANT

And they're bringing out some measuring sticks,
rulers for words, framed rectangles . . .

XANTHIAS

Will they be constructing bricks?

[800]

SERVANT

. . . bevels, too,
and wedges—all because Euripides
says he'll test their tragedies, every word.

XANTHIAS

Well, my guess is that Aeschylus
isn't liking this at all.

SLAVE

He just glared,
lowering his head as if he were a bull.

910

XANTHIAS

Who's going to judge this trial?

SLAVE

That's difficult.
Wise men are hard to find—in short supply.
And Aeschylus didn't really hit it off
with the Athenians . . .

XANTHIAS

Perhaps because
he thought that most of them were criminals.

SERVANT

. . . and he considered other people
worthless as judges of true poetry.
So at last they turned toward your master,
since he's got some knowledge of that art.
But let's go in. There's always trouble for us,
every time our master's in a rush.

[810]

920

[Xanthias and the Servant go into the house]

CHORUS *[in a parody of the tragic style]*

Now the loud-roaring hero feels in full his fury—
that valiant vehemence which surges up within,
when he confronts his rival in poetic craft
sharpening smooth-talking tusks, just like a boar.
His frenzied passion's going to make those eyeballs roll.
The battle's here at hand—helmet-glancing war,
horse-crested words, while splintered axles break apart,
as the subtle chisel-worker tries to push and parry
steed-prancing phrases from the man who builds our minds.
The bristling crest erect there on his shaggy neck,
his natural hair, a fearful scowl upon his brow,
and bellowing, he'll launch his language fixed with bolts,
like planking for a ship, he'll rip the words apart,
blasting with his giant's lungs. The other man,
the one who works his mouth, who tortures every word,
unrolling his smooth tongue and shaking envy's rein,
will dissect and parse those words, and, splitting hairs,
refute all that large labour of the former's lungs.

930 [820]

940

[Enter Aeschylus, Euripides, Dionysus, and Pluto, with attendants]

EURIPIDES

I'll not give up the chair—no more advice. [830]
I say I'm better in poetic skill.

DIONYSUS

Why are you silent, Aeschylus? You hear
the claim he's made.

EURIPIDES

His high-and-mighty pose—
he does that at the start of every play,
some hocus-pocus for his tragedies.

DIONYSUS

My dear fellow, that's too much big talk.

EURIPIDES

I know the man—and for a long time now
I've studied him. He makes crude characters
with stubborn tongues. As for his own mouth, 950
it's unrestrained and uncontrolled, unlocked,
no proper discourse, bombastiloquent.

AESCHYLUS

Is that so, you garden-goddess child? [840]
You say that of me, you gossip-monger,
a beggar's poet who picks and stitches rags?
You'll regret those words.

DIONYSUS

Hey, Aeschylus,
hold on. Don't fire up your heart so angrily,
with such ill will.

AESCHYLUS

No, no, I won't hold back,
till I've exposed the man and clearly proved
this cripples' poet is a boastful fool . . . 960

DIONYSUS *[to the attendants]*

Hey, boys, bring out a sheep—a black one, too.
It looks as if a storm's about to break.

AESCHYLUS:

. . . collecting all those monodies from Crete,
importing impure marriage into art . . .

[850]

DIONYSUS

Whoa, hold on there, much-honoured Aeschylus.
And you, my poor Euripides, back off
beyond this breaking storm—that would be wise,
in case his anger cracks your skull in two,
some heady phrase makes all your brain leak out
your hero Telephos. And you there, Aeschylus,
don't get so angry. Test him, but calmly—
and then be tested, too. It's just not right
for poets to engage in such abuse,
like two women selling bread. You bellow
as if you were a tree on fire.

970

EURIPIDES

I'm ready.

[860]

I don't mind biting or being bitten first,
whatever he prefers, about my diction,
or the songs and sinews of my tragic plays—
and by god, about Peleus, too,
my Meleager or my Aeolos,
or, even more about my Telephos.

980

DIONYSUS

What do you want to do? Tell us, Aeschylus.

AESCHYLUS

I have no wish to enter battle here.
The war we fight is not on equal terms.

DIONYSUS

Why's that?

AESCHYLUS

My poetry did not die with me,
but his did once he died. So it's down here—
he'll have it with him when he wants to speak.
But nonetheless since it's what you want,
we must go through with this.

[870]

DIONYSUS [*to the assembled group*]

Come now,
someone bring an offering here, and fire as well,
so I can pray before this contest starts,
our battle of the brains, and judge the fight

990

with maximum aesthetic expertise.

[addressing the Chorus]

Now for the Muses you should sing a song.

CHORUS

O you nine sacred Muses
mighty Zeus' virgin daughters,
gazing down on subtle minds,
you see intelligence at work
in men who write our maxims.
When such as these go out to fight,
with counterarguments and tricks,
with fiercely studied wrestling moves,
with crooked throws, come to us here,
observe the power of these mouths,
their awesome skill in making words,
sawing phrases up like sawdust.
Now our great contest in this art
stands ready, let the business start.

1000

[880]

DIONYSUS

Before we have you two recite your lines,
you ought to offer up your prayers.

AESCHYLUS

O Demeter,
who nourishes my mind, make me worthy
to be there in your mysteries.

1010

DIONYSUS *[to Euripides]*

It's your turn—
take some incense. Make an offering.

EURIPIDES

All right—
but I pray to different gods.

DIONYSUS

Personal ones?
Your very own? Freshly minted?

EURIPIDES

That's right.

[890]

DIONYSUS

Then pray away to those private gods of yours.

EURIPIDES

O air, my food, O pivot of my tongue,
O native wit, O nose that smells so fine,
whatever words I seize upon, let me
refute them—let the victory be mine.

1020

CHORUS

Now we're filled with great desire
to hear from poets with such skill,
the pathway in this war of words
they'll walk along. Their tongues are wild,
no lack of boldness in their mood,
nor are their intellects asleep.

It looks as though we're going to see
one man say something quite urbane
and finely trimmed. The other one
will seize him and his arguments,
the roots and all, and then attack
and scatter words around the place
like wrestle-rolling on a mat.

[900]

1030

DIONYSUS [*To Aeschylus and Euripides*]

You must speak at full speed. But see you talk
this way—with elegance, no metaphors,
and nothing someone else might say.

EURIPIDES

All right.

As for myself—the kind of poet I am—
I'll say that in my final words. For first,
I'll demonstrate this fellow's fraudulent,
a cheat. I'll show just how he took them in,
and fooled those idiots reared on Phrynichos.
First, he'd wrap a person up and sit him down
with his face hidden away—some character
like Niobe or his Achilles—
mere window dressing for the tragedy.
They didn't speak or even mutter.

1040

[910]

DIONYSUS

That's right. They didn't.

EURIPIDES

And then his Chorus thumped their lyrics out—
strings of them, four in a row without a break,
the character just sat on stage in silence.

DIONYSUS

Well, I liked that they kept quiet. It pleased me.
It wasn't any worse than those today
who babble on and on.

1050

EURIPIDES

You were a fool—
no doubt of that.

DIONYSUS

I think so, too. But why so?
Why did our friend here do that?

EURIPIDES

It was a trick
designed to keep spectators in their seats,
waiting for when Niobe might start to speak.
So the play continued on and on and on . . .

[920]

DIONYSUS

What a rascal! How he had me fooled!
[to Aeschylus]

Why are you fretting there and fidgeting?

EURIPIDES

Because I've caught him out. When he'd played this trick
and half the play was done, someone would speak up,
a dozen ox-like words—with eyebrows, crests,
some fear-faced things full of the bogey man,
which no one in the audience understood.

1060

AESCHYLUS

How miserable I feel . . .

DIONYSUS

Stay quiet please.

EURIPIDES

Nothing he said was ever clear.

DIONYSUS [*to Aeschylus*]

Don't grind your teeth.

EURIPIDES

He talked on about Scamanders, trenches,
shields with bronze enamelled griffon-eagles,
in horse-cliffed phrases hard to comprehend.

[930]

DIONYSUS

Yes, by god, one long night I got no sleep
from worrying what kind of bird was called
the tawny clear-voiced horse cock.

1070

AESCHYLUS

You idiot!

It was a symbol painted on the ships.

DIONYSUS

I thought it was Eryxis, Philoxenos' son.

EURIPIDES

Did you have to work a rooster in
just for the tragedy?

AESCHYLUS

You god-forsaken wretch,
what sorts of plays did you create?

EURIPIDES

None like you—
no horse-cock monsters or goat-stags, by god,
the sort they paint on Persian tapestries.
When I first took this art of plays from you,
crammed with bombast to the gills, fustian stuff,
at first I made it slim, reduced its weight,
with vesicles, and walks, and laxatives.
I gave a potion drawn from bookish chat,
and took care nursing it with monodies.

1080

[940]

DIONYSUS

And you mixed in Cephisophon, as well.

EURIPIDES

I wasn't fool enough to put in there
whatever stuff I chanced upon, or add
just anything I found. The character

who came out first would right away explain
on my behalf the background of the play.

1090

DIONYSUS

Which was better than your own, by god.

EURIPIDES

After those opening words I never set
anything superfluous in the play. No.
For me the woman spoke—so did the slave,
the master, maiden, the old woman, too.

[950]

AESCHYLUS

Well, shouldn't you be killed for daring this?

EURIPIDES

By Apollo, no. I was doing my work
the democratic way.

DIONYSUS [*to Euripides*]

My dear fellow,
I'd forget that—from your point of view
that's not the best line you could take.

1100

EURIPIDES [*indicating the audience*]

I taught these people here to speak their minds . . .

AESCHYLUS

I say so too—and before doing that
I wish you'd split apart—right down the middle.

EURIPIDES

. . . introducing subtle rules for words,
for verses nicely trimmed. I taught them to think,
to see, to understand, to love new twists
and double dealing, to suspect the worst,
to be too smart in everything . . .

AESCHYLUS

I agree.

EURIPIDES

. . . and I brought in domestic issues, too—
useful matters of things we understand,
things people here could challenge me about.

1110

[960]

They know their stuff—so they could test my art.
I didn't boast or lose my common sense.
Nor did I scare them all with characters
like Cynus and Memnon, who walk around
with bells attached. Look at our disciples,
his and mine—you know them all quite well.
Meganeitos and rough Phormisios
are his—great long-beard-lance-and-trumpet men,
flesh-rippers with the pine—whereas, for me
there's neat Theramenes and Cleitophon.

1120

DIONYSUS

Theramenes? Now, he's a clever man,
expert in everything. When he meets trouble,
when it hits him in the face, he gets away,
no problem, by changing who he is—
if being a Chian doesn't work for him,
he claims that he's Achaean.

[970]

EURIPIDES [*rushing his concluding speech*]

I taught these people here
to think about such things.
I brought logic into art.
I made them questioners.
Now they see everything
and understand it all.
Their minds are more profound—
they organize their homes
much better than before.
So now they ask "Where's this?"
"How's it going?" "Who took that?"

1130

DIONYSUS [*imitating Euripides speaking style here*]

Yes, by god, that's what they do.
Now each Athenian man
goes home and starts to yell—
to scream at his own servants,
"Where's my pot? My sardine—
who's bitten off its head?
My bowl from bygone years,
is it, too, dead and gone?
And where's my garlic clove?
I had it yesterday.
Who's munching on my olives?"
Before this, they'd just sit
and gape there stupidly,

1140 [980]

1150

like little mummy's boys
and silly sweet-toothed fools.

[990]

CHORUS [*to Aeschylus*]

You see this, radiant Achilles.
Come now, what can you say to him?
Don't let your anger take control
and carry you beyond the track.
He's charged you with some dreadful things.
But now, you noble gentleman,
respond to him, but not with wrath
Haul in your sails—except the tips—
then bit by bit bring in your ship.
Keep watching for an easy wind.
You just may get a gentle breeze.

1160

[1000]

DIONYSUS

Now you who were first among the Greeks
to raise the solemn towers of spoken words
adorning them with tragic gibberish,
be strong and spout forth eloquence.

AESCHYLUS

This trial enrages me—it pains my spleen
to have to answer such a man. But still,
to stop your claim that I'm incompetent
you answer this for me: Why should anyone
admire the man who is a poet?

1170

EURIPIDES

For cleverness
and good advice—and since we help improve
the men who live within our cities.

AESCHYLUS

So if that's something you didn't do,
instead transforming fine and decent men
to make them scoundrels, what would you say
you'd then deserve by way of punishment?

[1010]

1180

DIONYSUS

Death—but don't ask him.

AESCHYLUS

Consider first
the nature of the men he got from me—

were they not nobly born and six feet tall?
There were no runaways, no layabouts,
no scoundrels like today, no ne'er-do-wells.
No. Those men breathed spears and javelins,
white-crested helmets, coronets, and greaves,
with passions wrapped in seven oxhide folds.

EURIPIDES

This is getting bad.

DIONYSUS

His helmet-making
wears me down.

EURIPIDES

What exactly did you do
to make these men so noble?

1190

DIONYSUS

Aeschylus,
speak up. Forget your pride and stubbornness.

[1020]

AESCHYLUS

I wrote a play brim full of war god Ares.

DIONYSUS

Which one was that?

AESCHYLUS

My Seven Against Thebes.
Every man who saw it fell in love with war.

DIONYSUS

But you did something bad there with the Thebans—
you made them more courageous in the war.
For that you should be spanked.

AESCHYLUS *[to the audience]*

You people too,
you could have trained yourselves for war as well,
but you weren't so inclined. Then after that,
by putting on my Persians I instructed them
so they were always keen to beat their foes—
thus honouring our finest act.

1200

DIONYSUS

I was pleased
when you cried out in sorrowful lament,
“O child of Darius, who is dead,” and then,
the chorus clapped its hands and all yelled out
“Booo hooo.”

AESCHYLUS

Poets need to work on things like this. [1030]
Look back—they’ve been useful from the start,
the noble race of poets. There’s Orpheus—
he taught us rituals and not to kill, 1210
Musaeus showed us cures for sicknesses
and oracles as well, and Hesiod
taught farming, harvest times, and how to plough.
As for divine Homer, where’s his renown,
his special fame, if not in what he taught,
those useful facts about courageous deeds,
and battle ranks and how men arm themselves.

DIONYSUS

Well, that may be, but Homer didn’t teach
a thing to Pantacles, that clumsy oaf.
The other day while marching on parade, 1220
he clipped his helmet on, and then he tried
to tie the crest on top.

AESCHYLUS

And brave men, too—
Homer gave us lots—with them the hero
Lamachos. I took Homeric warriors, [1040]
and let my brain write many noble deeds
about great lion-hearted fighting men
like Patroclus and Teucer—in this way
I urged our citizens to match themselves
with them, when they heard the trumpet sound.
But by god I never made a single whore 1230
like Phaedra or that Sthenoboa.
No one’s ever known me as a man
who writes about the way a woman loves.

EURIPIDES

No, by god. Whatever you possess,
there’s nothing there of Aphrodite.

AESCHYLUS

Let her stay away! But she took her seat

when she sat down hard on you and yours.
She really squashed you flat.

DIONYSUS

She sure did, by god.
What you wrote about the wives of other men
you had to suffer with your own.

EURIPIDES

You wretched man, 1240
How has my Stheneboia harmed our state?

AESCHYLUS

Because you helped persuade the noble wives [1050]
of well-born men to drink down hemlock,
ashamed of those like your Bellerophon.

EURIPIDES

My Phaedra story—did I make that up?

AESCHYLUS

No—it was there. But it's a poet's task
to conceal disgrace—not put it on parade
front and centre and instruct men in it.
Small children have a teacher helping them,
for young men there's the poets—we've got 1250
a solemn duty to say useful things.

EURIPIDES

When you spout on of Lycabettus
and subjects like magnificent Parnassus,
does this involve your teaching useful things?
We need to use the language people use.

AESCHYLUS

You pestering demon, don't you see
that noble thoughts and fine ideas perforce
produce a language of commensurate size?
Besides, it's fitting for the demi-gods
to speak in loftier terms—just as they wear 1260 [1060]
much finer robes than ours. But you besmirched
what I displayed with such nobility.

EURIPIDES

What did I do?

AESCHYLUS

First, you dressed your kings in rags,
to make them pitiful to all who watched.

EURIPIDES

If I did that, what damage did it do?

AESCHYLUS

It's your fault no rich man any more
is keen to pay out money for a ship.
Instead he wraps himself in rags and weeps
and whines about how poor he is.

DIONYSUS

Yes, by Demeter, that's true. But underneath
he wears a tunic of pure wool. And then,
if he deceives them with a speech like that,
he pops up in the market by the fish.

1270

AESCHYLUS

And then you taught them how to babble on
with stupid gossip—so the wrestling schools
stood empty and the buttocks of our young,
who chattered all the time, were quite worn out.
You then convinced the Paralos' crew*
to argue with their officers. In my day
they were ignorant of this—all they knew
was how to yell for food and cry "Yo ho."

[1070]

1280

DIONYSUS

By Apollo, that's right—and how to fart
straight in the faces of the rowers there, or shit
on sailors down below, their mess mates.
On shore they'd rob someone. Now they talk back—
they never row—just sail out here and there.

AESCHYLUS [*rapidly summing up his opening argument*]

What crimes is he not guilty of?
Did he not put up on display
pimps and women giving birth
in holy shrines and having sex
with their own brothers, and then claim
that living is no life? So now,
because of him our city here
is crammed with bureaucratic types
and stupid democratic apes

1290 [1080]

who always cheat our people.
Nobody carries on the torch—
no one's trained in that these days.

DIONYSUS

No, by god, they're not. That's why
while at the Panathenic games 1300 [1090]
I laughed myself quite pissless—
a slow, pallid, porky runner
went on by—head drooping down—
far behind the rest. In that race
he wasn't very good. Well then,
the folks at Keremeios gate
began to whack him in the gut,
to hit his ribs and sides and butt.
While their hands were slapping him,
he let rip a tremendous fart 1310
which killed the torch. Then on he ran.

CHORUS

The event is huge, the strife intense—
the mighty war goes on. It's hard to choose. [1100]
When one man presses hard, the other one
wheels round and launches the attack once more.

[addressing Aeschylus and Euripides]

You two, don't you stay inactive where you sit.
For wit knows many varied ways to strike.
And so, no matter what you're fighting for,
speak out, set to, bring up your works—
the old and new. Put your daring to the test— 1320
say something that's intelligent and deft.
Don't be afraid the people watching here
are just too ignorant and will not see [1110]
the subtle points in what you two may say.
Don't worry on that score, for it's not true.
They've served in wars—and each man owns a book.
He understands the witty parts. You see,
it's in their nature to possess strong minds,
but now the whetstone's really sharpened them.
So have no fears—examine everything— 1330
at least for the spectators' benefit
since they've become so wise.

EURIPIDES

All right, I'll turn to the prologues you composed,
so I can start off with a test to check
the first part of a clever poet's tragedy.
In setting down just how events occurred
this man was never clear.

[1120]

DIONYSUS

Which one will you test?

EURIPIDES

Quite a few.

[To Aeschylus]

But first, will you recite for me
an opening from your *Oresteia*.

DIONYSUS

Let everyone keep quiet. Achilles, speak.

1340

AESCHYLUS *[quoting from the Choephoroi]*

"O Hermes underground, who oversees
my father's power, be my rescuer,
my ally, answering the prayers I make.
I've come back and returned unto this land."

DIONYSUS

You see some flaws in this?

EURIPIDES

More than a dozen.

DIONYSUS

But the whole thing's only four lines long!

[1130]

EURIPIDES

And each of them has twenty errors.

DIONYSUS

I warn you, Aeschylus, keep quiet. If not,
you'll forfeit these four lines and owe some more.

AESCHYLUS

Am I to remain silent just for him?

1350

DIONYSUS

I think that's best.

EURIPIDES

Right at the very start
he's made a huge mistake—as high as heaven.

AESCHYLUS

You do see you're talking rubbish.

EURIPIDES

If so,
it doesn't bother me.

AESCHYLUS

You claim I'm wrong—
well, where are my mistakes?

EURIPIDES

Recite the start again.

AESCHYLUS

"O Hermes underground, who oversees
my father's power . . ."

EURIPIDES

Orestes says this
at the tomb of his dead father, does he not?

AESCHYLUS

I won't deny it.

[1140]

EURIPIDES

Since his father died
a brutal death at the hands of his own wife
and by a secret trick, how can he claim
that Hermes watches over anything?

1360

AESCHYLUS

That's not my sense—when he speaks, he means
Hermes, god of luck, who watches all the dead.
And his words clearly show that this Hermes
obtained that office from his father Zeus.

EURIPIDES

So you've made an even bigger blunder

than I thought—if this subterranean job comes from his dad . . .

DIONYSUS

If that's the case,
he's a grave robber on his father's side.

1370

AESCHYLUS

That's cheap wine you're drinking, Dionysus,
it lacks bouquet.

[1150]

DIONYSUS

Recite another line for him.

[To Euripides]

And you, take care about the damage you inflict.

AESCHYLUS *[quoting again]*

“ . . . my father’s power, be my rescuer,
my ally, answering the prayers I make.
I’ve come back and returned unto this land.”

EURIPIDES

The skilful Aeschylus has just revealed
the same thing twice.

DIONYSUS

How so?

EURIPIDES

Look at the verse.

All right, I'll tell you—"I've come back" is followed by the word "returned"—coming back and returning—they mean the same.

1380

DIONYSUS

Yes, by god—
exactly like a man who says to someone,
“Hey, lend me a baking dish or, if you like,
a dish for baking.”

AESCHYLUS

You blithering idiot,
it's not the same at all. That line of verse
has beautifully chosen words.

[1160]

EURIPIDES

It does?

Then show me what you mean.

AESCHYLUS

To come unto a land
refers to someone with a native home—
he's come back—there's nothing else implied.
But when a man arrives who's been an exile,
he comes back and returns.

1390

DIONYSUS

By Apollo, that's good!
What do you say to that, Euripides?

EURIPIDES

I say Orestes didn't "return" home.
He came in secret, without permission
from those in charge.

DIONYSUS

By Hermes, that's good.
But I don't get what you mean.

EURIPIDES

Come on then,
try another line.

[1170]

DIONYSUS

Yes, let's have some more.
Get a move on, Aeschylus. And you,
keep looking out for something bad.

AESCHYLUS *[reciting more lines]*

"On this heaped-up burial mound I pray
my father hears and listens . . ."

1400

EURIPIDES

It's there again—
he's saying the same thing twice—
to hear, to listen—obviously the same.

DIONYSUS

Well, you fool, he is speaking to the dead.
And we don't reach them even with a triple prayer.

AESCHYLUS

All right, how do you compose your prologues?

EURIPIDES

I'll tell you. And if I say the same thing twice
or you see extra padding there, some verse
that doesn't suit the plot, then spit on me.

DIONYSUS

Come on, speak up. I need to clearly hear
the language in your prologues working well.

1410 [1180]

EURIPIDES [*reciting from one of his plays*]

"Oedipus to start with was a lucky man . . ."

AESCHYLUS

By god, no he wasn't—his nature
gave him a dreadful fate. Before his birth
Apollo said he'd murder his own father—
he wasn't even born! How could he be
a lucky man right at the very start?

EURIPIDES [*continuing to recite*]

"Then he became most wretched of all men."

AESCHYLUS

No, no, by god. He always was like that.
And why? Because as soon as he was born,
he was exposed out in the cold, in a pot,
so he wouldn't grow into a murderer
and kill his father. He dragged himself away
to Polybus on mutilated feet.
And after that he married an old woman,
though he was young, and, as things turned out,
she was his mother. So he poked out his eyes.

1420 [1190]

DIONYSUS

Then he'd have ended happy after all,
if, like Erastinides, he'd been a general.

EURIPIDES

You're being stupid. I make my prologues well.

1430

AESCHYLUS

Is that so? Well, by god, I won't scratch

each phrase word for word, but with help from the gods
I'll kill your prologues with a little oil jug.

[1200]

EURIPIDES

My prologues? With an oil jug?

AESCHYLUS

Yes, just one.

The way you write, well, everything fits in—
a little fleece, a little oil jug,
a little bag—they all mesh nicely in
with your iambics. Let me demonstrate.

EURIPIDES

What this? You'll demonstrate?

AESCHYLUS

That's what I'm saying.

DIONYSUS

All right, Euripides, you've got to speak.

1440

EURIPIDES [*reciting some more of his own lines*]

"Aegyptos, so many people say,
with fifty children in a rowing boat,
landing in Argos . . ."

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

EURIPIDES

What's this stuff about an oil jug?
You'll regret this.

DIONYSUS

Recite another prologue
so I can see the point again.

[1210]

EURIPIDES [*continuing to recite*]

"Dionysus clothed in fawn skins leaps
among the torches on Parnassus,
on that mount he waved his thyrsus—
there he danced and . . ."

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

O dear,
we've been stricken with an oil jug once again.

1450

EURIPIDES

It's no big deal. In this next prologue
he can't tie in his little oil jug.
"Among all men there's not one living
who's blessed in everything—if nobly born
he lacks sufficient livelihood, or else,
if basely born, . . ."

AESCHYLUS

. . . he's lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

Euripides . . .

EURIPIDES

What?

DIONYSUS

It seems to me
you should haul in your sails. This little oil jug—
it's going to introduce a mighty storm.

[1220]

1460

EURIPIDES

By Demeter, I won't even think of it.
Here's one will knock that oil jug from his hand.

DIONYSUS

All right, recite another one—take care—
keep your distance from that little oil jug.

EURIPIDES

"Abandoning Sidon city, Cadmus,
Agenor's son . . ."

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

My dear fellow, buy the oil jug from him,
so he can't shatter all our prologues.

EURIPIDES

What?

I should purchase it from him?

DIONYSUS

I think you should.

EURIPIDES

No way. I've got lots of prologues to recite—
ones where he can't stick in his little oil jug.
"Pelops, son of Tantalus, arrived at Pisa,
and riding his swift horses . . ."

1470 [1230]

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

You see—he stuck in that little oil jug
once again. Look, my good man, pay his price—
use all your means. You'll get it for an obol.
And it's really nice—a good one.

EURIPIDES

Not yet—

I've still got plenty left: "Oeneus once
from his own land . . ."

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

EURIPIDES

Let me at least recite the whole line first—
"Oeneus once from his own land received
a bounteous harvest—then while offering
first fruits for sacrifice . . ."

1480

[1240]

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

In the middle of the service? Who stole it?

EURIPIDES

Back off, my dear man—let him speak to this:
"Zeus, as truth reports . . ."

DIONYSUS

You'll be destroyed—

For he'll just say "lost his little oil jug."
These oil jugs pop up in your prologues
the way warts grow on eyes. For god's sake,
change the subject. What about his lyrics?

1490

EURIPIDES

All right. I'll show how bad he is at them.
His songs are awful—they all sound just the same.

[1250]

CHORUS

What's going to happen now?
I've got an idea how
he'll criticize and mar
the one whose lyrics are
our finest songs so far.
How will his censure ring
to a Dionysian king,
for me a fearful thing?

1500 [1260]

EURIPIDES

His songs are truly quite astonishing.
I'll give quick proof, for I'll condense them all
into a single song.

DIONYSUS

All right, you do that.
I'll gather up some pebbles and keep score.

[Someone begins the accompaniment on a flute]

EURIPIDES *[beginning his parody of Aeschylus]*

Phthian Achilles, O, you hear the crash—
the loud man-slaughtering BASH, why don't you come,
come here to help us? As the primordial race,
we honour Hermes by the lake—BASH.
Why come you not to our assistance?

DIONYSUS

That's two bashes for you, Aeschylus.

1510

EURIPIDES *[continuing the parody]*

Most glorious of Achaeian men, O Atreus,
who rules far and wide, learn of me—BISH BASH—
why come you not to our assistance?

[1270]

DIONYSUS

There's a third bash for you, Aeschylus.

EURIPIDES [*continuing the parody*]

Be still! Attendants on the bee priestess
are nigh to open up Artemis' shrine—BASH.
Why come you not to our assistance?
I have authority to utter out in full,
to speak those fatal orders ruling us
and this our expedition—BISH BASH.
Why come you not to our assistance?

1520

DIONYSUS

By ruling Zeus, what a pile of bashes!
The toilet's where I want to be right now—
this bashing's swollen both my kidneys.

[1280]

EURIPIDES

Don't go, not before you listen to
another group of songs, compressed medleys
of this man's lyric melodies.

DIONYSUS

All right then, go on.
But you can leave out all the bash and crash.

EURIPIDES [*continuing his parody of Aeschylus*]

How the Achaeans' twin-throned power, youth of Greece—
Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat—
sent by the Sphinx, presiding she dog of unlucky days—
Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat—
swooping bird with spear and with avenging hand—
Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat—
granting eager sky-diving dogs to light upon—
Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat—
the allied force assembled to assault great Ajax—
Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat.

1530

[1290]

DIONYSUS

What's this phlatto-thrat? Is it from Marathon?
Where did you pick up your rope-twisting songs?

1540

AESCHYLUS

I brought them to a noble place from somewhere fine,
lest I be seen to gather up my crop
from that same sacred meadow of the Muse

[1300]

as Phrynichos. But this fellow over here
gets his songs anywhere—from prostitutes,
Meletus' drinking songs, flute tunes from Caria,
from lamentations or dance melodies,
as in a moment I will demonstrate.
Let someone bring a lyre here—and yet
who needs a lyre for this man? Where is she,
that girl who beats time with her castanets?
Come hither, you Muse of this Euripides—
for your style fits the songs we're going to sing.

1550

[Enter a very old and ugly woman who accompanies Aeschylus' parody by clicking her castanets and dancing very badly]

DIONYSUS *[reacting to the old woman's appearance]*
This Muse is hardly the most gorgeous babe
we've ever seen from Lesbos, that's for sure.

AESCHYLUS *[parodying Euripides]*
You chattering kingfishers in the sea
in the ever-flowing waves
who wet wing-tops with water drops
like so much dripping dew,
and spiders underneath the roof,
your fingers wi-i-i-i-i-i-i-inding
threads for stretching on the loom,
work of tuneful weaving rods,
where dolphins, those flute-loving fish,
leap at the blue-peaked prows,
at oracles and stadiums.
I joy in early budding vines,
the spiral cluster, killing pain.
O my child, hurl your arms about me . . .
You see this foot?

[1310]

1560

[1320]

DIONYSUS
I see it.

AESCHYLUS
And the other one?

DIONYSUS
I see that too.

1570

AESCHYLUS *[to Euripides]*
You write this sort of bilge and then you dare

to criticize my songs—you, who wrote your tunes
to twelve-stringed music of Cyrene? Bah!
So much for his songs. I still want to check
his solo melodies, their lyric style.

[1330]

[parodying Euripides once more]

O Night, O darkly shining Night,
what are you sending me,
what dreams of woe,
from Hades' halls—
what souls without a soul,
the children of black night,
so horrible they raise my hair
in black corpse-clothes—
murder, murder—
such huge fingernails.

1580

Now, servants, light my lamp for me,
haul river water in your pails
and warm it up, so I
may rinse away my dream,
O spirit of the sea.

[1340]

1590

That's it—oh all you
who share this house with me,
gaze here upon these portents.
My Glyce's fled away—
she stole my cock and ran.
You nymphs born on the mountain peaks,
and you, O Mania, aid me now.

There I was, poor wretched me,
at work with all my daily tasks,
my spindle full of thread,
my fingers wi-i-i-i-i-i-inding,
as I wove skeins of yarn
to carry off to market
for sale in early morning.

1600

[1350]

But now my bird has flown,
flown off into the atmosphere
its wing-tips oh so nimble.
It's left me woes, woes,
and in my eyes tears, tears—
they trickle, trickle down,

1610

O miserable me.

O you Cretans, Ida's children,
seize your bows and rescue me.
Swiftly move your limbs,
make full circle round this house.
And child Diktynna, Artemis,
so beautiful, by all means bring
your baby bitches to my home.
And you, oh Hecate, Zeus' child,
with blazing fire-brands in both your hands,
light my way to Glyke's place,
so I can then reveal her theft
and catch her in the act.

[1360]

1620

DIONYSUS

Stop the songs.

AESCHYLUS

All right. I've said enough.
Now I want to bring him to the balance scale,
the very thing to test our poetry—
to check how much our phrases weigh.

DIONYSUS

Come here, then, if I have to do this—
treating poets just like cheese for sale.

CHORUS

Clever men like these take pains,
for here's a marvel once again.
Devices new and strange they bring.
Who else would think up such a thing?
I'd not believe it—even though
I met someone who told me so.

1630 [1370]

DIONYSUS

Come on. Stand beside the balance scales.

AESCHYLUS and EURIPIDES *[together]*

All right.

DIONYSUS

Now, each of you grab hold and don't let go
until I yell at you—I'll say "Cuckoo!"

[1380]

AESCHYLUS and EURIPIDES: *[each one holding a scale pan]*
We're holding on.

DIONYSUS
Speak your line into the scale.

EURIPIDES *[reciting]*
"I wish that Argive ship had never flown . . ." 1640

AESCHYLUS *[reciting]*
"O river Spercheios, where cattle graze . . ."

DIONYSUS
Cuckoo!!! Let go . . .

[Dionysus inspects the scale pans and sees that Aeschylus' side has sunk more]

The pan on this man's side
has gone much further down.

EURIPIDES
And why is that?

DIONYSUS
Why? Because he put a river in it.
He wet his words the way wool-sellers do—
whereas you put in a word with wings.

EURIPIDES
All right, let him speak again and match me.

DIONYSUS
Grab hold again.

AESCHYLUS and EURIPIDES
We're ready.

DIONYSUS
So speak down. [1390]

EURIPIDES *[reciting]*
"Persuasion has no temple except speech."

AESCHYLUS *[reciting]*
"The only god who loves no gifts is Death." 1650

DIONYSUS

Let go. Let go. This one's going down again.
He put death in—the heaviest of harms.

EURIPIDES

But I put in persuasion—and my line
was beautifully expressed.

DIONYSUS

Persuasion's light—
she's got no brains at all. Say something else,
a heavy line, immense and ponderous,
to make you sink.

EURIPIDES

A heavy line like that,
where can I find such lines in all my verse?

DIONYSUS

I'll tell you. "Achilles threw the dice—
two snake's eyes and a four." You'd better speak—
it's the last time the two of you get weighed.

[1400]
1660

EURIPIDES *[reciting]*

"His right hand grasped the heavy iron club . . ."

AESCHYLUS *[reciting]*

"Chariot piled on chariot, corpse on corpse . . ."

DIONYSUS

This time he got you once again.

EURIPIDES

How so?

DIONYSUS

He put in two chariots and two stiffs.
A hundred Egyptians couldn't shift that load.

AESCHYLUS

No more contest with me word for word—
put him in the scale pan with his wife and kids,
throw on Cephisophon. Let him step in,
sit down—he can bring all his books. For me—
I'll only speak two verses of my own.

1670
[1410]

DIONYSUS

These men are friends of mine, so I won't judge
the two of them. I don't want to be at war
with either man. One of them, I think,
is really clever. The other I enjoy.

PLUTO

Won't you fail to get the thing you came for?

DIONYSUS

What if I chose the other man?

PLUTO

Take one—
whichever one you wish, so you don't leave
and make your trip in vain.

DIONYSUS

May gods bless you.
Look, how 'bout this—I came here for a poet.

1680

EURIPIDES

What for?

DIONYSUS

So I might save our city
and let it keep its choruses. Therefore,
whichever one of you will give our state
the best advice, well, that's the man I'll take.
So first, a question for each one of you—
What's your view of Alcibiades?*

[1420]

This issue plagues our city.

EURIPIDES

The people there—
what do they think of him?

DIONYSUS

What do they think?
The city yearns for him, but hates him, too,
yet wants him back. But you two, tell me this—
what's your sense of him?

1690

EURIPIDES

I hate a citizen

who helps his native land by seeming slow,
but then will quickly inflict injuries
which profit him but give our city nothing.

DIONYSUS

By Poseidon, that's well said. Now, Aeschylus,
what's your view on this?

[1430]

AESCHYLUS

The wisest thing
is not to rear a lion cub inside the city,
but if that's what the citizens have done,
we'd must adjust ourselves to fit its ways.

DIONYSUS

By Zeus the saviour, this decision's hard.
One spoke with skill, the other was so clear.
All right, each one of you speak up again.
Tell me of our state—how can we save her?

1700

EURIPIDES

Use Cinesias as Cleocritus' wings—
then winds would lift them over the flat sea.

DIONYSUS

A really funny sight. But what's the point?

EURIPIDES

In a sea fight, they'd take some vinegar,
and dump the bottles in opponents' eyes.
But I know the answer—let me speak.

[1440]

DIONYSUS

All right, say on.

EURIPIDES

When those among us
who have no faith act faithfully, and things
bereft of trust are trusted . . .

1710

DIONYSUS

What's that?
I don't get what you're saying. Speak out
more clearly—more matter with less art.

EURIPIDES

If we removed our trust from politicians
on whom we now rely, and used the ones
we don't use now, we could be saved. It's clear
we're not doing well with what we're doing now,
if we reversed our course, we might be saved. [1450]

DIONYSUS

Well put, O Palamedes, you clever man. 1720
Did you come up with this idea yourself,
or is it from Cephisophon?

EURIPIDES

It's mine alone.
that bit about those jars of vinegar—
Cephisophon's idea.

DIONYSUS [*to Aeschylus*]

Now you. What do you say?

AESCHYLUS

About our state—acquaint me first of all
with those in her employ. Surely they're good men?

DIONYSUS

Of course they're not. She hates those worst of all.

AESCHYLUS

She loves the ne'er-do-wells?

DIONYSUS

Not really—
but she's got no choice. She has to use them.

AESCHYLUS

How can one save a city like this one, 1730
which has no taste for woolen city coats
or country cloaks of goat skin?

DIONYSUS

By Zeus,
to get upstairs, you'd best come up with something. [1460]

AESCHYLUS

Up there I'd talk, but I don't want to here.

DIONYSUS

Don't be that way. Send something good from here.

AESCHYLUS

When they consider their foe's land their own
and think of their land as the enemy's,
and when they look upon their ships as riches
and see their wealth as wretchedness . . .

DIONYSUS

Yes, but jury members wolf down all the cash.

1740

PLUTO

You should decide.

DIONYSUS

I'll make my choice between them.
I'll choose the one who's pleasing to my soul.

EURIPIDES

Do not forget those gods by whom you swore
to take me home. You have to choose your friends . . .

[1470]

DIONYSUS

My tongue made that oath, but I choose Aeschylus.

EURIPIDES

What have you done, you foulest of all men?

DIONYSUS

Me? I've picked Aeschylus to win. Why not?

EURIPIDES

Do you dare to look me in the face
after you've done the dirtiest of deeds?

DIONYSUS

What's dirty if this audience approves?

1750

EURIPIDES

You're heartless. Will you never think of me
now that I'm dead?

DIONYSUS

What if living isn't really dying,
or breathing dining, or sleep a pillow slip?

PLUTO

Come inside now, Dionysus.

DIONYSUS

What for?

PLUTO

So I can entertain you here, before you go.

DIONYSUS

An excellent idea, by god. I won't say no. [1480]

CHORUS

Blest is the man with keen intelligence—
we learn this truth in many ways

Once he's shown his own good sense
he goes back home again.

1760

He brings our citizens good things
as well as family and friends,
with his perceptive mind.

[1490]

So to be truly civilized,
don't sit by Socrates and chat
or cast the Muses' work aside,
forgetting the most vital skills
of writing tragedies.

Wasting time with pompous words,
while idly scratching verbal bits—
that suits a man who's lost his wits

1770

PLUTO

So now, farewell, Aeschylus—go,
save our city with your noble thoughts,
and educate our fools—we have so many.
Take this sword, hand it to Cleophon.

[1500]

Present this rope to tax collector
Myrmex and his colleague Nicomachos—
this hemlock give to Archenomos.

Tell them to come here fast without delay.

If they don't come soon, then, by Apollo,
I'll brand and cripple them, then ship them down
at full speed underground with Adeimantos,
Leucolophos's son.

1780 [1510]

AESCHYLUS

That I'll do. As for my chair of honour,
give it to Sophocles to keep safe for me

in case I ever come back here. He's the one
whose talent I would put in second place.
Bear in mind—the rogue right there, this clown,
this liar, will never occupy my chair,
not even by mistake.

[1520]

PLUTO *[to the Chorus]*

Let your torches shine,
your sacred torches light the way for him,
escort him on his way—and praise his fame
with his own songs and dances.

1790

CHORUS

First, all you spirits underneath the ground,
let's bid our poet here a fond farewell,
as he goes upward to the light. To the city
grant worthy thoughts of every excellence.
Then we could put an end to our great pain,
the harmful clash of arms Let Cleophon—
and all those keen to fight—war on their enemy
in their ancestral fields, on their own property.

[1530]

1800