TRANSLATOR’S NOTE

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This text provides links to explanatory notes (indicated by asterisks), but those reading the entire play might be better served by printing out those pages separately.

The translator would like to acknowledge the extremely valuable help of W. B. Stanford’s edition of The Frogs (London: Macmillan, 1963).

In the following translation, the normal line numbers refer to the English text. The ones in square brackets refer to the Greek text.

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.
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 (PANDOKEUTRIA)
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.

**XANTHIAS**

Not even this one—

“Here I am transporting such a load if I get no relief I may explode.”

**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. *

**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.

[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!?
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.

[DIONYSUS
All right, then.
Since you claim the donkey’s useless to you,
why not take your turn and carry it?

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?

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?

DIONYSUS

I’ve done naval service under Cleisthenes.*

HERCULES

At that sea battle?

DIONYSUS

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

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.*
For a woman?

DIONYSUS

No, no.

HERCULES

A young lad, then?

DIONYSUS

Certainly not.

HERCULES

Well, then, a man?

DIONYSUS

Ugh!

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?*

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,
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.

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.

HERCULES

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

DIONYSUS

Not ’til 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.

HERCULES

What about Agathon? Where’s he?
DIONYSUS  
He’s left us—
a fine poet lamented by his friends.  

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?  

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.
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.”

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.

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.

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.

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.

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]

DIONYSUS

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.

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.*

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.

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.

[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.

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 parrying 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
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?

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.

XANTHIAS

What’s this?

DIONYSUS

This?

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, hallooo!

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.

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.

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?

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!

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'm I supposed to row a boat?

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


[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.
The songs we sang for Nysas 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] DIOYSUS [still rowing]

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

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax.

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
   playing music on melodious pipes.
   Apollo as he strums his lyre
   loves us and what we sing,
   for in the marshy waters here
   we grow the reeds that bridge his string.
   Brekekekekoax 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
   Brekekekekoax koax koax.

DIONYSUS
   Stop it, you music-loving tribe!

CHORUS OF FROGS
   No, no. We’ll sing on all the more—
   if we’ve ever hopped on shore
   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
   Brekekekekoax koax koax—
   from you I’m catching your disease!
CHORUS OF FROGS
   If that’s the case, you’ll never please.
   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.

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.
   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.

[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.

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.

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!

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!

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?

XANTHIAS
    How 'bout 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—
Diagoras’ hymn to Iacchus.*

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.

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!

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.

[350]

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.

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
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,
whoever guides our state through storms
and is corrupted by some bribe,
betrays our watch posts and our ships
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
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.
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
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.

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.
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.

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,
[400]

come here with us to Demeter,
show us how you move along
this lengthy way with so much ease.

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.

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.

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
[420]
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.

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.

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.

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, 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, the rose-filled fields, and worship there the way we always do, with song and dance, where blessed Fates assemble, too.

[The Chorus exits]

DIONYSUS
Let’s see—what style do I use at this point 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,
   then took off on the run, while I stood guard.
   Now you’re caught—black-hearted Stygian rocks,
   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.

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

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.
[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.

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.

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?

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.

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.*

[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]
PANDOKEUTRIA
Plathane, Plathane, come out here.
That fellow’s back who came to our hotel
and ate up all our bread, all sixteen loaves.

[Enter Plathane, another landlady]
PLATHANE
My god, that’s the one.

XANTHIAS
Oh, oh. Someone’s in trouble.

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

XANTHIAS
Now he’s in for it.

PANDOKEUTRIA
And lots of garlic, too.

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

PANDOKEUTRIA  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.

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

PANDOKEUTRIA  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.

PANDOKEUTRIA  Then he pulled out his sword—he looked insane.

PLATHANE  My god, you poor dear!

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

XANTHIAS  Well, that’s exactly how he operates.

PANDOKEUTRIA  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.

PANDOKEUTRIA  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.

[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.

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.

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
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.

*[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.

*[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.

**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.

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.

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.

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?

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.

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.

[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.

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.

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
   Aiiiieee!!

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
   Aaiiiii!! 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.

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
   Aaiii! 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.

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,
making an awful din—on that foreign leaf
she squawks her nightingale’s lament,
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
to state their case, reform their evil ways.
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,
just like their fathers, your ethnic kinsmen—
that’s what they keep requesting. But you here,
whom nature made the wisest of all people,
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
of someone who will someday cry in woe,
this tiny irritating ape Cleigenes,
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.

This city, it often seems to me
treats our best and worthiest citizens
the way it does our old silver coins,
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,
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,
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
[740]
and dip his dink.

SERVANT
But not to beat you on the spot
when they proved that you’re the slave—and one
who claimed you were the master.

XANTHIAS
If he had,
he’d have had regrets—and that’s a fact.

SERVANT
What you just did is worthy of a slave,
something I love to do.

XANTHIAS
Forgive my asking,
but what is it you love to do?

SERVANT
It's more than love—
almost ecstasy—when I can curse my master out of ear shot.

XANTHIAS

What about really bitching,
whenever you’ve received a total thrashing
and run outside?

SERVANT

Yes, I do like that, too.

XANTHIAS

What about sticking your nose in everything?

SERVANT

By god, there’s nothing finer—that’s for sure.

XANTHIAS

By Zeus, divine protector of our race,
what about listening to our masters’ chat
when they spread gossip . . .

SERVANT

I’m even crazier for that!

XANTHIAS

. . . then passing on the gossip all around,
to everyone outside the house?

SERVANT

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.

[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.

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 . . .

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?

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.

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.

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?

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.

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!

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?

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.

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.

[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.

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

EURIPIDES
I’ll not give up the chair—no more advice.
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,
it’s unrestrained and uncontrolled, unlocked,
no proper discourse, bombastiloquent.

AESCHYLUS
Is that so, you garden-goddess child?
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,  
’til I’ve exposed the man and clearly proved  
this cripples’ poet is a boastful fool . . .  

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 . . .*  

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.

EURIPIDES  
I’m ready.  
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.*  

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
   with maximum aesthetic expertise.                 990

[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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 . . .

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 chap,
I’d forget that—from your point of view
that’s not the best line you could take.*

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. 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 Cycnus 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.*

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.*

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?”

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

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.

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?

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?

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?

DIONYSUS
Aeschylus,
speak up. Forget your pride and stubbornness.

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 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.*

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,
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,
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,
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 like Phaedra or that Sthenoboia.*
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, how has my Stheneboia harmed our state?

AESCHYLUS
Because you helped persuade the noble wives 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 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 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.*

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.”

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
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

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
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.

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—
say something that’s intelligent and deft.
Don't be afraid the people watching here
are just too ignorant and will not see
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—
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

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.

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!

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.

AESCYLUS
   Am I to remain silent just for him?  

DIONYSUS
   I think that's best.

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

AESCYLUS
   You do see you’re talking rubbish.

EURIPIDES
   If so,  
   it doesn’t bother me.

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

EURIPIDES
   Recite the start again.

AESCYLUS
   “O Hermes underground, who oversees  
   my father’s power . . .”

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

AESCYLUS
   I won’t deny it.  

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?

AESCYLUS
   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.

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

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.

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.

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.*

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,
[1170]
try another line.

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 . . .”

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

EURIPIDES [continuing to recite]

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

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

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

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, . . .”

AESCYLUS

. . . 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—
[1220]
it’s going to introduce a mighty storm.

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 . . .”

AESCYLUS

. . . 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—
[1230]
ones where he can’t stick in his little oil jug.
“Pelops, son of Tantalus, arrived at Pisa,
and riding his swift horses . . .”

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 . . .”

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?

EURIPIDES

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

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?

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.

EURIPIDES [continuing the parody]
Most glorious of Achaean men, O Atreus,
who rules far and wide, learn of me—BISH BASH—
why come you not to our assistance?

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?

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.

EURIPIDES
Don’t go, not before you listen to
another group of songs, compressed medlies
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-philatto-thrat—
sent by the Sphinx, presiding she dog of unlucky days—
Tophlatto-thratto-philatto-thrat—
swooping bird with spear and with avenging hand—
Tophlatto-thratto-philatto-thrat—
granting eager sky-diving dogs to light upon—
Tophlatto-thratto-philatto-thrat—
the allied force assembled to assault great Ajax—
Tophlatto-thratto-philatto-thrat.

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

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
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.

[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-i-ing
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?

DIONYSUS
I see it.

AESCHYLUS
And the other one?

DIONYSUS
I see that too.*

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.

[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.

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.

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-ing,  
as I wove skeins of yarn  
to carry off to market  
for sale in early morning.

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,  
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.

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.

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!”

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 . . .”  

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.  

EURIPIDES [reciting]  
“Persuasion has no temple except speech.”

AESCHYLUS [reciting]  
“The only god who loves no gifts is Death.”  

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.

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.

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.

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?*
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?

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?

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?

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.

DIONYSUS

All right, say on.

EURIPIDES

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

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.
DIONYSUS
Well put, O Palamedes, you clever man.
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,
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.

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.

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 . . .

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?

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.

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

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.
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.*

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.

PLUTO [to the Chorus]
   Let your torches shine,  
your sacred torches light the way for him,  
estort him on his way—and praise his fame  
with his own songs and dances.

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.*

NOTES
[Note that the line numbers in the following notes refer to the translated text  
not to the original Greek]

* (line 21) Phrynichus, Ameipsias, Lycias: comic poets, rivals of  
Aristophanes. [Back to text]

* (line 44) the fight at sea refers to the naval victory of Arginusae. Athenian  
slaves who had fought were freed (this is the first of a number of  
references to this action). [Back to text]

* (line 61) Cleisthenes: a well-known homosexual in Athens, a favourite  
target of Aristophanes. [Back to text]

* (line 68) Molon: a man remarkable for his size—either very large or very  
small. The joke would seem to demand something very small. Given  
the sexual innuendo, it may be the case that Molon was a very big man  
with (reputedly) a very small penis. [Back to text]

* (line 72) brother: Hercules and Dionysus are both sons of Zeus, hence  
brothers. [Back to text]

* (line 76) stew: Hercules was famous for his enormous appetite. [Back to text]
* (line 82) dead: Euripides had died in Macedonia the year before the first production of *The Frogs*. [Back to text]

* (line 88) Iophon: son of Sophocles and a writer of tragedies. [Back to text]

* (line 101) Agathon: an important and successful Athenian tragic playwright. He’d recently left Athens and was living in Macedonia. [Back to text]

* (line 102) Xenocles and Pythangelos: minor Athenian tragic playwrights. [Back to text]

*(line 131) Cerberus: in one of Hercules’ most famous exploits, he went down into Hell and returned with the Cerberus, the watch dog of Hades. [Back to text]

*(line 148) hemlock: a lethal poison which begins by numbing the lower limbs. [Back to text]

*(line 153) Kerameikos: a district in Athens. [Back to text]

*(line 167) two obols: the standard amount for welfare payments or daily pay for soldiers and sailors. [Back to text]

*(line 168) Theseus: the legendary founder of Athens, who made his own journey to Hades and back, and hence (according to this comment) introduced Athenian customs into Hades. [Back to text]

*(line 178) Morsimus: an inferior tragic playwright. [Back to text]

*(line 179) Cinesias: an Athenian poet. [Back to text]

*(line 185) the mysteries: secret cult religious rituals for special groups of initiates. [Back to text]

*(line 190) Pluto: god of Hades. [Back to text]

*(line 218) Ravens: a reference to a curse invoking the ravens to pick someone’s bones. Charon lists various regions of Hell like so many stop on a bus route. [Back to text]

*(line 226) Wuthering Rock: a part of the landscape of hell (possibly invented here by Aristophanes). [Back to text]

*(line 239) Salamis: an island close to Athens, famous for its sailors. [Back to text]

*(line 245) Chorus of Frogs: it’s not clear whether this chorus remains off
*(line 254) feast of Jars: a reference to an annual Athenian festival (the Anthesteria) held early in the year in the precinct of Dionysus "in the marsh" (Limnai). The festival involved a lot of drinking.*

*(line 332) Empousa: a celebrated Athenian ghost-monster who could change her shape.*

*(line 336) so we can drink together: Dionysus here appeals to the audience, specifically to the Priest of Dionysus who traditionally sat in the front row.*

*(line 343) Hegelochos . . . seals are calm: Hegelochos was an actor in Euripides' plays who garbled a word and made the lines ridiculous (like changing "sea" to "seal").*

*(line 361) Iacchos was a minor divine presence associated with Dionysian celebrations. Diagoras may refer to a notorious Athenian atheist.*

*(line 375) daughter of Demeter: a reference to Persephone, wife of Pluto, king of Hades.*

*(line 399) Cratinus: a well-known and successful comic poet before Aristophanes.*

*(line 414) Aegina . . . Thoracion . . . Epidauros: Aegina was an island centre for illegal trade during the war. Thoracion was (one assumes) well known as a corrupt official. Epidauros was a naval centre close to Athens.*

*(line 479) Archedemos . . . teeth: a complex joke about a prominent Athenian politician, alleging that he is not a genuine citizen (something that was determined at seven years of age).*

*(line 498) Corinth, son of Zeus: an expression meaning (in effect) "always the same old stuff." People from Corinth were (by reputation) never tired of boasting about the divine origin of the founder of their city.*

*(line 600) Theramenes: An Athenian politician famous for his political survival skills.*

*(line 633) Cleon . . . Hyperbolos: Athenian politicians with a special interest in leading the common people.*
*(line 762) Cleophon . . . votes are equal: Cleophon was an Athenian politician in favour of the war. The gibe here suggests he's not a true Athenian. Aristophanes' prediction that Cleophon would soon be sentenced to death came true a year later. [Back to text]*

*(line 768) Phrynichus: Athenian politician who led the revolution in 411 BC. [Back to text]*

*(line 775) Plataeans . . . masters instead of slaves: after the naval battle of Arginusae, the Athenians freed the slaves who had fought and gave them rights of citizenship equivalent to the rights of the Plataeans, important allies of Athens. [Back to text]*

*(line 800) Cleigenes . . . clothes: Aristophanes here attacks the keeper of a public bath and laundry for cheating his customers, predicting soon he will lose his political office. [Back to text]*

*(line 804) our new gold ones, as well: a famous comparison between the political leaders and the debased coinage (one of the effects of the war). [Back to text]*

*(line 815) palaestra: the traditional school in Athens, emphasizing physical fitness and the arts. [Back to text]*

*(line 817) red heads: a reference to foreigners or slaves, not true Athenians. [Back to text]*

*(line 821) scapegoat: once a year in Athens two condemned criminals were beaten out of the city and executed in a purification ritual to cleanse the city of its collective guilt. [Back to text]*

*(line 962) about to break: Dionysus pretends he needs to offer a sacrifice to placate the god of storms. [Back to text]*

*(line 850) monodies . . . marriage into art: an attack on Euripides’ innovations and on the alleged immorality in his plays. Monodies are long lyrical solos for main characters. [Back to text]*

*(line 981) Telephos: a beggar hero of one of Euripides’ plays. [Back to text]*

*(line 1041) Phrynichos: the most important writer of tragedy before Aeschylus. [Back to text]*

*(line 1076) rooster . . . just for the tragedy: Aeschylus refers to a rooster in Agamemnon. [Back to text]*
*(line 1086) Cephisophon: an Athenian who lived in Euripides’ house and was rumoured have assisted Euripides with his plays and had an affair with his wife.  [Back to text]*

*(line 1101) line you could take: Euripides’ sympathies in his life appeared to be with the oligarchs, not with the democrats in Athens.  [Back to text]*

*(line 1117) with bells attached: Cynus and Memnon were characters in plays by Aeschylus. Warriors had bells attached to their shields or to their horses’ harnesses.  [Back to text]*

*(line 1122) Cleitophon: an Athenian member of the group around Socrates.  [Back to text]*

*(line 1128) Achaean: this joke is hard to render accurately. The Greek says (literally) “not a Chian [i.e., from Chios] but a Kian” or (more freely) “not a Chian with a ch but a Kian with a k,” indicating the man’s slippery character, able to change nationality by altering the spelling of the word. The change to “Achaean” may make the joke somewhat more compressed and workable, especially when the speech is spoken rather than read.  [Back to text]*

*(line 1155) Achilles: calling Aeschylus "Achilles" is a reminder both of his traditionally noble character and of his mood. Like Achilles he sits there silent and enraged. [Back to text]*

*(line 1203) finest act: a reference to the defeat of the Persians at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC, for most Athenians the high point of their city’s history.  [Back to text]*

*(line 1231) Phaedra and Sthenoboea: an attack on heroines in plays by Euripides.  [Back to text]*

*(line 1273) by the fish: a reference to the fact that fish was an expensive food in Athens at the time.  [Back to text]*

*(line 1277) Paralos’ crew: the Paralos was the flag ship of the Athenian navy. [Back to text]*

*(line 1391) and returns: Aeschylus’ hair-splitting point is that “come back” and “return” mean different things, because the latter is appropriate for those whose political status is uncertain.  [Back to text]*

*(line 1429) Erastinides: Athenian general condemned to death after the battle of Arginusae.  [Back to text]*
demonstrate: in the section which follows Aeschylus repeatedly uses the phrase "lost his little oil jug" to bring out the triviality of Euripides' verse, especially its rhythms and its imagery. [Back to text]

that too: Aeschylus is calling attention to the rhythmic feet in Euripides’ verse. Dionysus, of course, misunderstands and starts inspecting Aeschylus’ feet. [Back to text]

Cyrene: a notorious prostitute. [Back to text]

raise that load: Egyptians had a reputation for great strength. [Back to text]

Alcibiades: a brilliant and charismatic, but erratic and controversial Athenian politician and general in the closing years of the Peloponnesian War. [Back to text]

flat sea: Cinesias was very tall and skinny, and Cleocritus was reported to look like an ostrich. [Back to text]

Palamedes: a hero in the Trojan war. [Back to text]

wretchedness: Aeschylus is here apparently defending the early Athenian policy of putting all their faith in the navy to prosecute the war, leaving the land open for enemy occupation. [Back to text]

pillow slip: Dionysus is here mocking Euripides with echoes of the latter’s own verses. [Back to text]

Adeimantos: a general in Athens, later accused of treachery. [Back to text]

properties: Cleophon was a leader of the pro-war party. The point here is that many of those advocating war were not putting their own property in danger, unlike many Athenian farmers and landowners whose lands were occupied by the enemy forces. [Back to text]