

METATHEATRE IN ARISTOPHANES' *FROGS*:
DIONYSOS, IMMORTALITY, AND THE *AGON*
AS A PLAY-WITHIN-A-PLAY



ABSTRACT: Metatheatre, the concept of self-referential theatre, thoroughly permeates Aristophanes' *Frogs*, bringing four vital aspects of the play – Athens, theatre, poets, and immortality – into dialogue. In this paper, I examine the role of metatheatre in the play, particularly its relationship to the concept of poetic immortality. There are numerous breaks in dramatic illusion in the play, which serve a humorous purpose, but also introduce the role of comedy in ensuring the salvation of both Athens and tragedy (Dionysos' two intentions in *Frogs*). The second half of the play is made up of the metatheatrical device of a play-within-a-play. This presents a world of poetic immortality, with poets, their works, and the institution of theatre surviving indefinitely in the Underworld. Metatheatre thus clearly ties comedy with salvation and illustrates the fact that the greatest poets never truly die.

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.*¹

IN ONE OF HIS MORE FAMOUS LINES, William Shakespeare reduces human life to nothing but a performance on a stage. Yet in doing so, Shakespeare draws attention to the fact that his actors are also mere 'players' who 'in their time play many parts', entering and exiting the world portrayed on stage,

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1. *As You Like It* II.7.139–41, Norton edition. The idea of the ages of man and a man 'playing many parts' in his life is an ancient one dating back to Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 2.13.16). Kokolakis also discusses this notion of "life being a stage", stating it is an idea familiar to a number of early writers and philosophers; see Kokolakis (1960) 87–91.

thus demonstrating the artificiality of theatrical performance. This kind of self-referential device is an aspect of metatheatre, a term first coined by Lionel Abel in 1963. Aristophanic comedy is in its nature metatheatrical; *Frogs* is no exception, exhibiting a self-awareness of its own theatricality. The characters directly address the audience, criticise other comic poets' techniques while simultaneously making use of them, and the characters even briefly become actors, donning costumes on top of their own and adopting a different character's persona. Furthermore, the second half of the play can be read as containing a larger, embedded metatheatrical device, a play-within-a-play. This device and the other examples of metatheatre in *Frogs* function not only to make the audience aware that they are watching a play, but also incite commentary on the importance of comedy and two important themes explored in *Frogs*, salvation and immortality.

1. DEFINITIONS: IMMORTALITY, METATHEATRE, AND ARISTOPHANES

1.1 Immortality

Frogs centres on Dionysos' journey to the Underworld to bring back a poet to save both tragedy and Athens, and the play is thus concerned with salvation, the afterlife, and immortality.² Immortality can be defined as exemption from death, such as the case of the undying Olympian gods; however, it can also refer to endless life or existence after death.³ It is this second definition that is pertinent in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, particularly when one considers the fate of the great poets, Aeschylus and Euripides.⁴ These poets enjoy an endless existence in the Underworld, where they continue to engage in activities they would have practiced in real life, namely dramatic competition. It is the help of these esteemed poets that Dionysos seeks in his quest. Dionysos

2. I generally transliterate Greek words: e.g. Dionysos (not Dionysus), Dikaiopolis (not Dicaeopolis). For well-known Greek titles and names, however, I follow English spelling: e.g. Aeschylus (not Aiskhylos), *Bacchae* (not *Bakkhai*).

3. See *OED* s.v. 'Immortality'.

4. Sophocles is also grouped with these 'great poets', but he does not feature in the *agon* because he died shortly before *Frogs* was performed. Therefore, Aristophanes mentions his name in conjunction with the other great poets, Aeschylus and Euripides, but does not have Sophocles feature in the contest.

believes that there are no great poets left (71–72) and their passing has left both tragedy and Athens in decline.⁵ Bringing back a great poet will, as Dionysos believes, regenerate tragedy and Athens (1418–21). Thus, the salvation of Athens is bound up with the concept of immortality; it is an immortal poet, a poet who enjoys a continued existence after death, who will fulfil Dionysos' aim.

1.2 Metatheatre

The term 'metatheatre' is rooted in the concept of self-awareness: the play itself knows that it is a play, and the characters, as Abel states, "are aware of their own theatricality".⁶ His definition of metatheatre is based on self-referentiality and the falseness of the dramatic world portrayed on stage. Dunn likewise defines metatheatre as "self-referential drama, drama that draws attention to and thematizes its status as performance".⁷ According to Dobrov, 'metadrama' and 'metatheatre' are types of metafiction, "where a narrative or performance recognizes, engages, or exploits its own fictionality".⁸

Although the term 'metatheatre' is widespread in academic circles, Rosenmeyer takes issue with it, particularly the use of the prefix '*meta*'. In ancient Greek, its meaning is broad. At its most basic it means 'with, after, or beyond', and it is the last, 'beyond', that is usually applied in compound words; for example, metaphysics encompasses the study beyond the realm of physics, dealing with questions of being, substance, time, and reality.⁹

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5. All references to the text of *Frogs* come from Dover (1993). All translations are my own.
 6. Abel (1963) 60. 'The world is a stage' and 'life is a dream' in Abel's metatheatre: spectators do not believe that the world of the play and the people on stage are real. Therefore, Abel argues, the emotions and sufferings seen on stage seem theatrical (105).
 7. Dunn (2011) 361. Dunn goes on to argue that there are two groups of metatheatre: authorial and theatrical. Authorial metatheatre comments on the role of the playwright or director in formulating the plot. An example of this type includes the metatheatrical presentation of a character as a playwright or director, directing their fellow characters. Theatrical metatheatre centres around objects, such as costumes, props, or acting space, that have a separate and distinct meaning from that which they are supposed to have in the drama; they have a double meaning (361–2).
 8. Dobrov (2001) 9. He clarifies: "It is important to emphasize that 'metatheater' and 'metafiction' are placed in a hierarchical relationship with 'metatheater' [which is] a theatrical species of 'metafiction'. This is not to be confused with the more specialized usage in which 'metafiction' refers merely to the reflexive aspects of the modern novel (with 'fiction' representing a genre)" (Dobrov (2001) 166).
 9. Rosenmeyer (2002) 90. The term 'metaphysics' seems to have originally referred to the

Rosenmeyer asserts that when the prefix '*meta*' is used, the meaning of the resulting compound word implies a superior entity that judges and critiques its inferior; for instance, he suggests that a term such as metapoetics (superior entity) critically examines various systems of poetics (inferior). However, according to Rosenmeyer, metatheatre lacks this critiquing function and does not judge and examine theatre. He suggests 'paratheatre' as a better alternative, but Rosenmeyer also asserts that Abel did not need the prefix when he coined the term because he was identifying something that was already present within the term 'theatre'.¹⁰ However, I disagree. Drama is not, as a rule, always self-referential.¹¹ Instead, it is metatheatre that can bring a new, critical dimension to a dramatic work, drawing attention to theatrical processes and sparking analytical interest. It is capable of inciting critical examination of conventions, questioning the nature of theatrical practices, what the theatre means and represents, and the future of the art. Comedy in particular can, often obviously, draw attention to theatrical devices, making fun of the artificiality of the theatre. It can identify, satirise, and critique the very techniques it highlights. Furthermore, the prefix '*meta*' is appropriate; all three simple definitions of the Greek word are applicable. Metatheatre occurs *with* theatre (occurring as a play is running and within the framework of the drama), looks *beyond* and above the drama presented on stage, and can elicit critical interest *after* the event. Therefore, metatheatre is an entirely appropriate term to refer to the notion of self-referential theatre. It includes features in the plot, staging, machinery, characterisation, and costuming of a play that make either obvious or assumed reference to the process of making theatre, be it the process of writing, performing, acting, staging, or constructing the theatrical space.

works that came after (*meta*) Aristotle's *Physics*, that is, the perceived position of 13 books of Aristotle that deal with questions of ontology. These books were placed after the *Physics* in the received arrangement of Aristotle's works. However, the term has been used from an early period to describe the "science of things transcending what is physical or natural". See *OED* s.v. 'Metaphysics'.

10. Rosenmeyer (2002) 90–1.

11. Here I refer largely to plays that fall in the dramatic genre of 'Realism'. For example, the plays of Henrik Ibsen would, by convention, take place in a proscenium arch theatre, placing the audience in a situation akin to voyeurs, mere observers watching a scene as if they were watching an event in the real, everyday world. The drama depicted on stage is not metatheatrical, but rather part of the self-contained world depicted on stage.

1.3 Aristophanic Metatheatre and Dramatic Illusion

Taplin and Rosenmeyer assert that Old Comedy is characteristically self-referential and capable of recognising itself as fiction.¹² Metatheatrical elements such as the *parabasis*, which involves the chorus of the play breaking out of dramatic character and directly interacting with the audience, are a standard feature of Old Comedy. However, it is important to note that although Aristophanic comedy contained a large number of metatheatrical features, this does not mean that it was incapable of maintaining dramatic illusion. Sifakis makes a highly contested claim, stating that dramatic illusion “was entirely alien to Greek theatrical audiences”; he defines dramatic illusion as “created by the realistic representation on stage of dramatic situations and characters that have a true resemblance to real life situations and people”.¹³ Sifakis’ definition conflates ‘illusion’ with ‘realism’ or ‘naturalism’. Similarly, Taplin and Muecke reject the term ‘dramatic illusion’, arguing that Aristophanic comedy is entirely non-illusionary because the audience are aware they are not watching a realistic slice of life.¹⁴ However, they and Sifakis fall into the same trap, conflating dramatic illusion and realism. These scholars understand dramatic illusion only as the existence of *realistic* illusion on stage, thus any play that is not realistic cannot maintain dramatic illusion. However, an illusion does not have to be realistic to exist on stage and be maintained. There is a ‘real’ world of the play, that is to say, a world that exists on the stage in which certain characters or events, however fantastical, are real. Indeed, according to Dobrov, dramatic illusion “is understood as the force permitting one to engage in, and enjoy a make-believe world”.¹⁵ For instance, it is completely fantastical to imagine that Medea can fly away in a chariot pulled by dragons (Eur. *Med.* 1317–22) or that the ghost of Dareios could appear in *Persians* (Aesch. *Pers.* 619–842). However, if one accepts that the ‘real’ world of the play allows for such supernatural events, then the illusion is maintained. If Xerxes were to cry out in surprise that Dareios (the actor playing him) is solid and not a transparent ghost, or if Medea were to, as Trygaios does in *Peace*, acknowledge the *mechane* operator, this would rupture the dramatic illusion.

12. Taplin (1986) 164, Rosenmeyer (2002) 96. As Aristophanes is our chief source for Old Comedy, any discussion of conventions of Old Comedy will inevitably be a discussion of *Aristophanic* comedy.

13. Sifakis (1971) 7, 9.

14. Muecke (1977) 54, Taplin (1986) 164.

15. Dobrov (2001) 12.

Bain takes a similar stance against Sifakis, noting that:

there are extended passages where no overt account is taken of the audience and where the actors are clearly maintaining the pretence of being people involved in an action (it does not matter that often the action is a totally fantastic one —the actor is still for the moment Trygaeus and not the unknown Athenian who played him).¹⁶

Therefore, Bain credits an Athenian audience with being able to distinguish between illusion and reality; likewise, Lada-Richards notes that the Greek audience knew they were watching an actor engaged in a process of imitation (*mimesis*).¹⁷ Indeed, to assume that illusion must equal realism, and therefore dramatic illusion without realism is not illusion, is a rather reductive argument that ignores an audience's powers of critical thinking. As Gutzwiller notes, it is precisely the conflation of 'illusion' and 'realism' that has resulted in many scholars now abandoning the term 'dramatic illusion' altogether, sometimes in favour of terms such as 'dramatic pretence'.¹⁸ In this article, I use the term 'dramatic illusion' for two reasons, partly for convenience, but also because I think the term does not have to imply realism. Indeed, the conflation of realism and illusion arguably arises from interpretive studies of later drama, such as Shakespeare's plays, and not Old Comedy specifically.¹⁹ When examining Aristophanes, scholars like Bain, Lada-Richards, and Dobrov accurately acknowledge that Old Comedy was capable of creating and maintaining dramatic illusion. In defining the term 'dramatic illusion', I follow their observations and those of Dover, who defines cohesive dramatic illusion as "uninterrupted concentration of the *fictitious* personages of the play on their *fictitious* situation".²⁰

Therefore, dramatic illusion is something that can exist and be "uninterrupted" within an entirely fictional and even fantastical setting. Yet many typical features of Aristophanic comedy involve breaks in dramatic illusion, such as the *parabasis*, as well as moments where the characters manipulate costumes on stage, and directly interact with the audience. Aristophanic comedy is thus in its nature metatheatrical; metatheatre and comedy are intertwined

16. Bain (1977) 5–6.

17. Bain (1977) 5, Lada-Richards (1997) 68.

18. Gutzwiller (2000) 103, 105. Taplin (1986) prefers to avoid 'dramatic illusion' (164); Moodie (2007) explicitly states a preference for the term 'dramatic pretence' over 'dramatic illusion' (1). See below p. 163–4.

19. Abel, for example, did not consider Old Comedy in his examination of metatheatre.

20. Dover (1972) 56, emphasis added.

in the creation and execution of the comic play. Dover makes note of this relationship between metatheatre and comedy, arguing that when dramatic illusion is broken, it is often broken for comic effect.²¹ Chapman takes this notion further, commenting on the “comic possibilities of *pretending* to create [dramatic] illusion, and then rupturing it to parody the ‘seriousness’ of tragedy”, a parody that entertains the spectator and elicits laughter; he does not deny the existence of dramatic illusion, but argues that Aristophanic comedy *relied* on the rupture of dramatic illusion to convey humour.²² Dover and Chapman thus present compelling points, emphasising both the existence and the rupture of dramatic illusion as necessary features in Aristophanic comedy. The existence of dramatic illusion creates and maintains the fictitious world in which the characters exist, and the rupture of dramatic illusion facilitates comic moments. Both are thus essential to Aristophanes’ primary aim: to make the spectator laugh.

2. JUST FOR LAUGHS?:

METATHEATRICAL BREAKS IN DRAMATIC ILLUSION

From its outset, *Frogs* is highly self-referential. Entering the stage, Xanthias says: *εἴπω τι τῶν εἰωθότων, ᾧ δέσποτα, / ἐφ’ οἷς ἀεὶ γελῶσιν οἱ θεώμενοι*; (“should I say one of the usual things, master, which the spectators always laugh at?”; 1–2). Aristophanes ruptures the dramatic illusion of the play, immediately acknowledging the audience’s presence and poking fun at a particular (and expected) comic formula. Xanthias then receives a request from Dionysos to refrain from typical scatological humour (7–8). Xanthias disregards this (9–10) and goes on to say:

*τί δῆτ’ ἔδει με ταῦτα τὰ σκεύη φέρειν,
εἴπερ πόησω μηδὲν ὄνπερ Φρόνιχος
εἴωθε ποιεῖν καὶ Λύκις κάμειψίας;
σκεύη φέρουσ’ ἐκάστοτ’ ἐν κωμῳδίᾳ.*

Indeed, why is it necessary for me to carry this luggage, if I’m not really going to make any jokes like Phrynikhos does? Lukis and Ameipsias also have luggage-carrying scenes each time in their comedies. (12–15)

21. Dover (1972) 56.

22. Chapman (1983) 2–3. Chapman’s emphasis.

Aristophanes is thus making fun of, and subtly making use of, a certain comic trope, while simultaneously criticising other comics for doing so. Indeed, Xanthias is performing a luggage-carrying scene and engaging in scatological humour at the same time that Dionysos is criticising these techniques. Aristophanes makes jokes while simultaneously poking fun at comedy itself. This opening scene thus sets the tone for the whole play: it will be a play about plays, but nevertheless a humorous play about plays. Indeed, Dover uses the opening scene as an example to illustrate the comic effect of breaking the dramatic illusion. Aristophanes' criticism of other poets' use of scatological humour not only results in a laugh, but also suggests his superiority to his rivals, a conventional practice in Old Comedy.²³

There are several other scenes that break dramatic illusion, exemplifying the play's self-referentiality. For instance, while terrified by the spectre of Empousa, Dionysos calls out: *ἱερεῦ, διαφύλαξόν μ', ἵν' ᾧ σοι συμπότης* ("My priest! Protect me so that I can dine with you later!"; 297). Dionysos shatters the illusion of a self-contained fictional world, and makes an appeal directly to the audience, specifically the priest of Dionysos seated in the front row.²⁴ Once again, this rupture serves a comic purpose; the sheer hilarity of the god, terrified out of his wits, appealing to his own priest would undoubtedly have been cause for laughter.

Costume play or 'role-playing within a role' as Lada-Richards terms it, is another metatheatrical technique Aristophanes uses to evoke laughter in *Frogs*. Dionysos arrives at Herakles' house disguised, rather poorly, as Herakles himself. As Habash notes, he is dressed in a yellow tunic, which is associated both with Dionysian festivals and with femininity. In addition, he wears *kothornoi*, boots traditionally worn by tragic actors, but also associated with women and travellers; over this outfit he wears a traditional Heraklean lion skin.²⁵ Thus, the effeminate Dionysos is visible beneath his more masculine Herakles costume. Lada-Richards examines this effect in more detail, arguing that, although Dionysos is wearing the costume of the demi-god, it seems unlikely that the actor playing Dionysos was also wearing a mask of Herakles.²⁶ Indeed, the fact that Dionysos' Herakles costume is imperfect and the character of Dionysos peeks through suggests that his costume is missing a vital component of identification. Thus, the actor playing Dionysos was

23. Dover (1972) 58–9. See also Allison (1983) 12, Slater (1995) 30.

24. See commentary in Dover (1993) 230.

25. Habash (2002) 2–3.

26. Lada-Richards (1999) 159.

most likely wearing the mask and costume of the god, with only the costume (and not the mask) of Herakles laid over. The impact of this, Lada-Richards asserts, emphasises the effect of role-playing within a role; the character of Dionysos is clearly imitating another character, Herakles.²⁷

This type of role-playing is not limited to *Frogs*, or even Aristophanes. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, Dionysos dresses Pentheus in the attire of a Maenad and drives him mad (821–46; 912–70), convincing him that this is the best way to spy on the Maenads outside Thebes. Similarly, in *Thesmophoriazusae* Euripides and Agathon dress up the Kinsman as a woman so that he can spy on the all-female congregation of the Thesmophoria (212–63); later, after their ruse has been discovered and he has been captured and bound, the Kinsman and Euripides re-enact scenes from Euripides' tragedies *Helen* and *Andromeda* in an attempt at a rescue (850–923, 1016–1132). Also in *Acharnians*, Dikaiopolis is about to make an anti-war speech and borrows the ragged, tragic costume of Telephos from Euripides (407–79). In these examples, the characters overlay their costumes with that of another character, but, just as in *Frogs*, it is unlikely the characters changed their masks. For instance, in *Bacchae* and *Thesmophoriazusae* it is important for the audience to recognise that the character is in disguise. Certainly, in *Bacchae* it is significant for the plot that the audience knows the actor in front of them is Pentheus disguised as a Maenad, as it is this fact that heightens his tragic death at the hands of his mother Agave. Similarly, in *Thesmophoriazusae* it is the comedy of the scene that is heightened by the audience's awareness of the Kinsman's disguise; the hilarity of the scene would be further emphasised when the actor playing the Kinsman covers his costume, consisting of his original grotesque mask of an old man, padded body-suit, and large phallus, with the addition of a woman's dress. Despite the costume, the original character is visible underneath. In addition, the ragged Telephos costume that Dikaiopolis dons in *Acharnians* bears considerable similarity to Dionysos' in *Frogs*. The holes in Telephos' rags allow the character of Dikaiopolis to show through, just as Dionysos is seen under his incomplete patchwork of a costume.

Later in the *Frogs*, Dionysos attempts to maintain a Heraklean persona, as if he were an actor performing the character of Herakles. In *Bacchae*, Pentheus' mind is inflamed by Dionysos just like the minds of the Maenads. Although under the god's influence, Pentheus unwillingly adopts certain characteristics of the persona he has taken on, just as Dionysos (willingly) does in *Frogs*. Similarly, in *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Acharnians* Dikaiopolis,

27. Lada-Richards (1999) 159.

Euripides, and the Kinsman take on certain personas that correspond with their new costumes, believing that these will be useful in their various quests, whether it be peace with Sparta or escape. Dionysos likewise has a motive for dressing and acting as Herakles. Because Herakles has previously been to the Underworld, Dionysos believes this costume and persona will ease his journey through the Underworld (108–15). In all these examples, costume and persona both constitute important parts of role-playing within a role, regardless of how incomplete or ragged the costume may be. Dionysos, however, seems to go further than attempting to maintain Herakles' persona; indeed, Habash thinks that Dionysos believes, or pretends to believe, that he has *become* the character of Herakles, and that he automatically takes on the demi-god's traits.²⁸ For example, consumed by fear at the spectre of Empousa, Xanthias says ἀπολούμεθ', ὄναξ Ἡράκλεις ("we'll be destroyed, lord Herakles"; 298), thus referring to Dionysos by Herakles' name. Furthermore, when Dionysos arrives at the house of Hades, Xanthias tells him οὐ μὴ διατρέψεις, ἀλλὰ γέουσει τῆς θύρας, / καθ' Ἡρακλέα τὸ σχῆμα καὶ τὸ λῆμ' ἔχων; ("don't delay, but have a try of the door in Herakles' manner and Herakles' spirit"; 462–63); Xanthias urges Dionysos to commit to a realistic portrayal of his character and take on Herakles' very spirit. Thus, Dionysos exemplifies an actor's role: to dress on stage and act as if he indeed were a particular character.

However, Habash argues that the true characteristics of Dionysos are displayed when he forgets his assumed role, steps out of his Herakles character, and tries to resume his proper identity. He and Xanthias have just engaged in an elaborate scene, each man swapping between the Herakles costume and Xanthias' own slave clothes (495–99). Yet once Dionysos wishes the doorkeeper to know that he is in fact Dionysos, he is not able to prove his divinity any better than his own slave Xanthias can. Habash concludes that Dionysos played the roles of Herakles and Xanthias so well that the other characters are not able to distinguish between Dionysos playing his role (Herakles or Xanthias) and representing his true self (Dionysos).²⁹ Conversely, Lada-Richards takes an alternate view, arguing that Dionysos comes across as an incompetent theatre actor precisely because he fluctuates so easily between his characters. In particular, she notes that an accurate imitation of a character requires an interplay between physical dressing up, in mask and costume, and dressing up in soul and spirit.³⁰ Dionysos does both imperfectly, with his

28. Habash (2002) 3.

29. Habash (2002) 5.

30. Lada-Richards (1999) 168–70.

Dionysian dress and character peeking through the costume and demeanour of Herakles.

Dionysos, although intending to be a good, believable actor, is in fact a poor one. His initial entrance in his Herakles-costume inspires Herakles' (and likely also the audience's) laughter as his own effeminate character peeps through. He also does not embody Herakles' typical bravery, soiling himself in fear that he will be punished at the doorkeeper's hands (479); yet it is precisely his incompetence that is humorous. Furthermore, the elaborate scene of costume swapping between Dionysos and Xanthias (494–634) is an example of metatheatrical costume play. When each man takes on the costume of Herakles, each one steps into Herakles' character: *σὺ μὲν γενοῦ γὰρ τὸ ῥόπαλον τουτὶ λαβὼν / καὶ τὴν λεοντῆν, εἴπερ ἀφοβόσπλαγχνος εἶ· / ἐγὼ δ' ἔσομαι σοι σκευοφόρος ἐν τῷ μέρει* (“take this club and lion-skin and become me, if really you are fearless of heart; and I'll be the luggage-carrier, in turn”; 495–99). Not only does this serve an incredibly important purpose, eliciting humour, but the metatheatricality of the costume-swapping also highlights the artificiality of the theatre, a space in which identity can be easily shed and a new one taken on.

Metatheatre can also have more serious applications. In keeping with the dramatic conventions of Old Comedy, the chorus breaks dramatic illusion and addresses the audience directly in the *parabasis*, for *τὸν ἱερὸν χορὸν δίκαιόν ἐστι χρηστὰ τῇ πόλει / ξυμπαραινεῖν καὶ διδάσκειν* (“it is right and useful for the sacred chorus to join in advising and teaching the city”; 686–87). Their advice is of a serious nature. The chorus state that all citizens should be made equal (687–88) and no citizen should be deprived of his rights (692). After the victorious battle of Arginusai in 406 BCE, slaves and metics who fought in the battle were granted Athenian citizenship. The chorus refer to this event, finding it *αἰσχρόν* (reproachful; 693) that a single battle can change a slave to a citizen, but they also applaud the democratic unity the Athenians showed in passing this legislation in the first place: *ἀλλ' ἐπαινῶ· μόνα γὰρ αὐτὰ νοῦν ἔχοντ' ἐδράσατε* (“but I applaud you, for these were the only sensible things you did”; 696). Furthermore, the chorus refer to the men exiled after the oligarchic coup of 411 BCE. Aristophanes suggests they were *σαλαεῖς τι Φρυνίχου παλαίσμασιν* (tripped up by the tricks of Phrynikhos; 689), this Phrynikhos being the leader of the coup. These men, the chorus argue, are nevertheless good, intelligent men who took a wrong turn; they should be forgiven and have their citizen rights restored. The city should be able to make use of *τοῖς χρηστοῖσιν ἀθθίς* (“the useful ones again”; 735), therefore the chorus make an appeal to the audience: *πάντας ἀνθρώπους ἐκόντες συγγενεῖς*

κτησώμεθα / κἀπιτίμονες καὶ πολίτας, ὅστις ἂν ξωνναυμαχῆ (“let us readily accept as our kinsmen and citizens with full rights, whoever wants to fight with us”; 701–2). The chorus urge democratic unity and solidarity as a means to survive the Peloponnesian war and defeat their Spartan enemies.

When the chorus steps out of character and addresses the audience directly, the effect is two-fold. First, the audience are being addressed by their fellow Athenians, a chorus composed of Athenian men who are speaking out an Athenian poet’s advice. Second, the real advice for saving the city is given in the *parabasis*, a conventional, naturally metatheatrical feature of Old Comedy. In particular, Dobrov suggests that the metatheatrical elements demonstrate that comedy is more effective than tragedy at saving the city, that comedy, in fact, holds the key to Athens’ salvation.³¹ Although Dionysos came to the Underworld to find a *tragedian* to save tragedy and to save Athens, it is the *comic* play that does so. Therefore, metatheatrical elements of *Frogs* such as the *parabasis* highlight the importance of comedy in advising the city. By providing direct advice to the audience, the chorus of a comedy may hold the key to Athens’ salvation, and, if the advice is taken, Athens’ immortality.

3. METATHEATRICAL PLAY-WITHIN-A-PLAY: THE PLAY’S THE THING

The concept of a play-within-a-play, as Dobrov applies it to Greek drama, involves a miniature theatrical situation embedded within a larger dramatic framework.³² Furthermore, he states that the play-within-a-play has its own structure consisting of an ‘internal’ director, player, and audience.³³ A similar phenomenon of an internal theatrical production is identified by Lada-Richards in her examination of the metatheatrical elements of Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae*. The Kinsman, who is attempting to escape his bonds, collaborates with the character of Euripides to put on internal productions of *Helen* and *Andromeda*. Kritylla, the woman guarding the Kinsman, is the observer of these paratragic scenes, becoming what Lada-Richards dubs an

31. Dobrov (2001) 155.

32. Dobrov (2001) 15, 20.

33. Dobrov (2001) 23.

internalised spectator watching an internal tragic play.³⁴ This notion of an internal play can also be applied to *Frogs*; there is an internal play that has its own internal *krites*, plot, audience, actors, and theatrical space occurring within the wider 'external' play, that is, *Frogs* itself.

3.1 Internal *Krites*: Dionysos

In the first part of the play, Dionysos is demonstrating the transition from actor to role; he represents both Dionysos the character, and Dionysos the actor taking on the role of Herakles. Indeed, as Lada-Richards notes, a stage performer has "unlimited transformability" and is therefore like the human counterpart of Dionysos, a deity who is characterised by "endless mutability and fickleness of shape".³⁵ Dionysos is a god of transitions; as the god of wine, he is associated with the transition from sobriety to drunkenness, and as the god of the theatre with the transition from actor to role. After the *parabasis* of the play, the *agon* (competition) between Aeschylus and Euripides takes place. It is in this second half of the play that Dionysos has shed his Herakles costume to assume his Dionysian identity. Again, he demonstrates the 'unlimited transformability' of an actor on stage.

Lada-Richards argues that in the *agon* Dionysos becomes equated with the audience of a tragic play, becoming the internalised spectator of the *agon*. Moreover, Lada-Richards states that Dionysos expresses the diversity of opinions that an audience can have; sometimes he reacts like a buffoon, and sometimes he makes erudite observations. Therefore she concludes, he represents the internal audience.³⁶ Certainly, I would agree that Dionysos becomes an internalised spectator of the *agon*, as he views, comments, and critiques the events before him. However, Lada-Richards' argument ignores the other spectators of the *agon* who also provide commentary and criticism: the actual chorus of *Frogs* who assume the role of the audience in the internal play. Lada-Richards goes on to assert that Dionysos represents the union of two types of chorus, tragic and comic. A tragic chorus, according to Taplin, is almost a neutral observer of events on stage, empathising sometimes with one character and sometimes with another, but having no control of what

34. Lada-Richards (1997) 71–74.

35. Lada-Richards (1997) 95. See Cole (2007) 334: "Dionysus is a god who plays many roles, and he can change his appearance at will".

36. Lada-Richards (1999) 279–80.

will happen; conversely, a comic chorus has a greater role in determining the events of the play.³⁷ Because Dionysos remains somewhat neutral in the *agon* by empathising with both Aeschylus and Euripides, but is also the one who will determine the winner of the contest, Lada-Richards argues that he represents a synthesis of both a tragic and comic chorus.³⁸ However, the fact that Dionysos has ultimate control over events means he cannot conceivably represent, not even partially, a neutral tragic chorus. Instead, this power and control associates him far more with a different type of internal spectator: a *krites*, one of the men who judged the dramatic contests and determined the winners.³⁹ His comments and critiques of Aeschylus and Euripides better represent his thought process in assessing the contestants as a *krites*, rather than his empathy with the contestants as an audience member. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the cult statue of Dionysos was placed in the theatre during dramatic performances to signify the god's presence.⁴⁰ Thus, Dionysos' role as the *krites* in the internal theatre in *Frogs* would mirror the presence of the god judging a real-life contest, visually demonstrated by his cult statue in the actual theatre.

3.2 Internal Actors, Audience, Plot

With Dionysos as the internal *krites*, the second half of *Frogs* resembles a dramatic competition complete with internal actors, audience, and plot. To begin with, the *agon* itself can be interpreted as the internal plot. The *agon* begins with a critique of each playwright by the other, then moves on to the weighing of verses, and finally the playwrights are both asked to provide their best advice to the city, before Dionysos makes his final choice on which poet to take back with him from the Underworld. Thus, the internal plot develops around a series of events that leads towards the resolution of both the internal and external plays; Dionysos achieves his overall aim to bring back a poet to save Athens and save tragedy. If we accept this interpretation of the *agon*, Aeschylus and Euripides would then become the internal actors. It is they

37. Taplin (1996) 194.

38. Lada-Richards (1999) 295–6.

39. To avoid the confusion of the word 'judge' with jurors in the ancient Greek law courts, I use the Greek term *krites* (κριτής) to refer to the judges of the dramatic contests.

40. See Ar. *Eq.* 536, Ar. *Ran.* 809–11, Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 60.

who participate in the *agon* and drive the internal plot towards its conclusion, performing the internal play to the internal *krites* (Dionysos) and audience.

It is the chorus themselves that represent the internal audience; they watch the *agon* with considerable interest, commenting on the competition (896–99, 1112–16, 1251–60) and encouraging the competitors (1004–6). However, unlike Dionysos, they do not have the power to determine the outcome of the *agon*; that power rests with Dionysos, the *krites*, alone. Compared to Dionysos, the chorus is far more the neutral observer Lada-Richards identifies. Their comments could influence Dionysos' opinion, likely in the same way that the laughter of the audience could have influenced *kritai* in Athens, but the final decision does not rest with them. Furthermore, this is a chorus made up of real-life Athenian performers, which have already stepped out of character and given advice to the audience in the *parabasis*, thus marking the chorus as a group that is interested in the fate of Athens. The chorus is therefore strongly identified with Athens, equating the chorus with the real, Athenian audience sitting in the theatre. Moreover, the chorus is composed of Eleusinian initiates. This cult of Demeter and Kore was based at Eleusis, but was of high cultural significance to all (including the non-initiated) Athenians because Athens played a crucial part in the cult. It was the starting point for the *pompe*, the annual cult procession from Athens to Eleusis, and the *archon Basileus* oversaw the non-religious aspects of the Mysteries.⁴¹ Moreover, large parts of the audience would have had personal involvement in the cult as initiates in the Mysteries; indeed, when Alkibiades was accused of profaning the Mysteries in 415 BCE, it enraged the *demos* and was seen as an attempt to overthrow the democracy.⁴² As such, the external audience is invited to view the internal play via an internal audience that resembles themselves.

3.3 Theatrical Space

Perhaps the most obvious and interesting part of the internal play is the creation of an internal theatrical space, that is to say, a space in which the internal

41. Mylonas (1961) 229, 246, 252–7, Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 34. Furthermore, a board of five men called the *epistatai* was chosen from among the Athenians to oversee the treasury of the two Goddesses. See *IG I³* 32.7–12, Cavanaugh (1996) 1. In addition, the *pompe* had not taken place in the eight preceding years due to the Spartan occupation of Dekeleia, except in 407 BCE when Alkibiades facilitated it by leading the procession with a guard of soldiers. See Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.18–20, Plut. *Alc.* 34.

42. See Thuc. 6.28.2, Plut. *Alc.* 19.

play will be performed. Dionysos enters this space when crossing the lake. Rather than the customary single obol paid for passage to the Underworld, Dionysos pays two obols, the price of a theatre ticket according to Whitman, Spatz, and Moodie.⁴³ Therefore, Moodie remarks that “everything that happens to Dionysos once he reaches the Underworld is to some extent a play-within-a-play”.⁴⁴ This question of payment for theatre tickets is a somewhat disputed one, largely due to the paucity of evidence from classical Athens. Demosthenes states that if he had not been able to secure seats of honour for Phillip’s ambassadors in 346 BCE, *ἐν τοῖν δυοῖν ὀβολοῖν ἐθεώρουον ἄν* (“they would have watched the performance in the two-obol seats”; *de Cor.* 28). In his speech ‘On Organisation’ he states that *μὲμνηται [...] τοῖν δυοῖν δ’ ὀβολοῖν ἅπαντες* (“everyone remembers the two obols”; *Dem.* 13.10), and this statement is thought to refer to this ticket price. However, apart from these references in Demosthenes, evidence for a two-obol payment for the theatre comes from later sources, some which associate this price with the *theorikon* or theoric fund, a fund attributed to Perikles (*Plut. Per.* 9.3) that was established for the poorer citizens to enable them to buy seats. Scholiasts such as Ulpian explicitly link the two-obol price with the *theorikon* (*schol. Dem.* 1.1), as does a scholiast on Aristophanes’ *Wasps* (*schol. Ar. Wasps* 1189); the *Suda* also states this.⁴⁵ Interestingly, the *Suda* elsewhere states that the *theorikon* was one drachma, and this price is echoed by Harpokration.⁴⁶ Given this confusion, as well as the fact that only sources later than the fifth century mention a price in conjunction with a theatre ticket, it is difficult to say with certainty what the price of a theatre ticket was and if Aristophanes’ audience would have understood Dionysos’ payment of two obols as a relatively subtle reference to theatre tickets. The two obols Dionysos pays could also be pay-

43. Whitman (1964) 235, Spatz (1978) 121–2, Moodie (2007) 64.

44. Moodie (2007) 64. See also Whitman (1964) 235.

45. Ulpian’s scholion on Demosthenes’ Oration 1: *οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι ἔναγχος ἀτὰ πεποιήμασι θεωρικά, ὥστε λαμβάνειν ἐν τῷ θεωρεῖν ἕκαστον τῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει δύο ὀβολούς* (“The Athenians had recently established the *theorikon*, so that they received two obols from each spectator in the city”); scholion on Aristophanes: *θεωροῦντες τοὺς δύο ὀβολούς παρῆχον τοῖς ἀρχιτέκτοσιν* (“Spectators at the theatre handed over two obols to the theatre manager”); *Suda* s.v. ‘*θεωρικόν*’: *διεδίδοτο τοῖς πολίταις τὸ θεωρικόν, ὅπερ ἦσαν δύο ὀβολοί* (“the *theorikon* was handed over to the citizens, which was two obols”).

46. *Suda* s.v. ‘*θεωρικά*’: *ἐψηφίσαντο ἐπὶ δραχμῇ καὶ μόνον εἶναι τὸ τίμημα, θεωρικὸν αὐτῇ θέντες ὄνομα* (“they voted that there be a single payment of one drachma; the payment put in place was called the *theorikon*”); Harpok. s.v. ‘*θεωρικά*’: *Φιλόχορος δὲ ἐν τῇ γ’ τῆς Ἀτθίδος φησί· “τὸ δὲ θεωρικὸν ἦν τὸ πρῶτον νομισθὲν δραχμῇ τῆς θέας, ὅθεν καὶ τοῦνομα ἔλαβε”* (“The Attic Philochoros says: the first *theorikon* was originally one drachma paid for a seat in the theatre, from which it received the name”).

ment for the return journey he must make. Nevertheless, Moodie's assertion that everything after Dionysos' lake crossing is somehow a play-within-a-play is not entirely without merit, largely due to the highly ambiguous nature of the lake Dionysos crosses when entering the Underworld.

The lake stands between the street that Dionysos leaves behind and the Underworld, representing the boundary between life and death; yet it can also represent the boundary between reality and fiction. Therefore, the lake forms the boundary between the 'real' world that Dionysos has just left (the street where Herakles' house is located) and the fictional space of the internal play. The presence of the Frogs on this boundary further highlights the liminal significance of the lake.⁴⁷ The Frogs are highly ambiguous creatures impossible to identify with the binary characteristics of alive or dead, real or unreal; they are in fact a mixture of these elements.⁴⁸ It is precisely because they live on the lake, a boundary between the worlds of the dead and the living, that they are impossible to neatly categorise. Moreover, their enigmatic identity is further heightened by the fact that they inhabit a double limen: the boundary between life and death, and the boundary between land and water.⁴⁹ Indeed, Aristophanes' Frogs call themselves *λίμναῖα κορηῶν τέκνα* ("marsh-dwelling children of the spring"; 211), thus identifying themselves with the ambiguous liminality of their marshy, shoreline habitat.

In addition, the Frogs express a connection to the Anthesteria festival, which took place in the temple precinct of Dionysos *en Limnais* (Dionysos in the Marshes). This three-day festival was celebrated at the change from winter to spring, at a time when the worlds of the living and the dead were believed to touch and ghosts would appear. Thus, just as the Anthesteria festival demarcated a transitional period and an intersection between the living and the dead, so too does the lake in Aristophanes' play. Furthermore, the festival was celebrated in a marshy location akin to the marshy lake where the Frogs live. The festivities at the temple of Dionysos *en Limnais* were also accompanied by the croaks of real-life frogs who lived in the marshes around the temple.⁵⁰ Aristophanes' Frogs themselves make reference to this, recalling the songs they used to sing at the Anthesteria festival (211–19). Thus the

47. I use 'Frogs' (capitalised) to refer to the characters in Aristophanes play and 'frogs' (uncapitalised) to refer to the animal.

48. For further discussion see Moorton (1989) 312–13, Edmonds (2004) 133–4. Cf. Griffith (2013) 158.

49. Frogs are amphibians; in ancient Greek *ἀμφίβιος* (*amphibios*) means life (*bios*) of both kinds (*amphi*), referring to their aquatic and terrestrial lifestyle.

50. See Moorton (1989) 314–16, Griffith (2013) 158, Felton (2007) 88, Burkert (1985) 237–8.

identity of the Frogs is closely connected with Dionysos, and as he is also the god of theatre, they become associated with the theatre. Therefore, just as the Frogs come to embody the boundary and transition between life and death, they can also demarcate another important boundary and transition: the entrance to the theatre space of the internal play and the transition from external reality to internal fiction.

3.4 Issues with the Play-within-a-Play

The play-within-a-play that occurs in *Frogs* differs from what modern literary criticism would consider a true play-within-a-play, such as ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. His example features an internal play complete with an internal plot (the tragic story of Pyramus and Thisbe), internal actors (such as Nick Bottom, Francis Flute, or Snug), and an internal audience (the lovers). The *agon* in *Frogs* does not resemble this. Indeed, the *agon* is a contest that bears similarity to works such as Plato’s Socratic dialogues in which speakers present points in a back-and-forth debate. Dobrov notes that, unlike examples of the play-within-a-play such as ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ or ‘The Murder of Gonzalo’ in *Hamlet*, the spectator of Greek drama is not positioned to recognise the presence of the play-within-a-play, but rather it “beckons to the spectator without being presented formally as a play”.⁵¹ This lack of a clear and obvious internal play structure is evident in *Frogs*. The *agon* does not have as clearly defined internal actors, audience, or plot as ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ does; indeed, Euripides and Aeschylus are arguably not the only internal actors because Dionysos and the chorus also drive the internal plot, interjecting and suggesting new ways for the tragedians to structure their competition. For example, Euripides initially states he will start comparing prologues with Aeschylus (1119–21), but it is Dionysos who abandons this idea in favour of weighing the tragedians’ verses (1368–9), and the chorus compliment him on this suggestion (1370–7). Thus, the chorus and Dionysos interact and drive the competition, compelling the tragedians to follow along. This is comparable with Kritylla in *Thesmophoriazusae*. She is the character who interrupts the paratragic scenes acted out by Euripides and the Kinsman. For example, she is incorporated into the re-enactment of *Helen* as the character of Theonoe, but she quickly dismisses this, stat-

51. Dobrov (2001) 15, 24.

ing her name is Kritylla, and denying the Egyptian setting of *Helen* in favour of the Athenian one in which the Kinsman is about to be punished (855–923). Thus Kritylla is a spectator to the events, but is also integrated and involved in the action, just as Dionysos and the chorus are in *Frogs*. The distinctions of internal *krites*, internal actors, internal audience, or internal plot are not as obvious as those of Shakespeare's dramas. Nevertheless, the fact that the *agon* in *Frogs* is a contest between the two tragedians reflects the basis of the ancient dramatic festivals, primarily, that dramas were performed as part of a competition presented before the *kritai*, an audience, and the god Dionysos. The *agon* of *Frogs* is therefore a play-within-a-play of the ancient Greek kind, an informal, unacknowledged internal plot structure occurring within a larger dramatic work.

Frogs, as Moodie makes particular note of, has two tragic poets at its core and is highly concerned with the theatre and its processes. She concludes that "most of these theatrical references lose much of their pretense-disrupting power because of their very prevalence, in that they become a part of the dramatic pretense", dramatic pretence referring to dramatic illusion.⁵² Moodie is thus saying that, because *Frogs* is so concerned with the theatre, any ruptures in dramatic illusion in fact *become* part of the dramatic illusion of the play. However, when Xanthias and Dionysos continually swap costumes, or when Xanthias mocks a particular comic formula, it nevertheless breaks dramatic illusion by calling attention to theatrical conventions. If we apply Moodie's logic to Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, we see the same flaw in her argument. Like in *Frogs*, a theatrical process, acting, significantly informs the entire play. The Kinsman is dressed up first as a woman, and then takes on paratragic roles as Helen and Andromeda. Following Moodie's argument, any time the process of acting or taking on another character is depicted on stage in *Thesmophoriazusae*, dramatic illusion is not ruptured. Yet this is not the case. The dramatic illusion is nevertheless shaken when the Kinsman and Euripides act out the paratragic scenes; indeed, other characters express their surprise when the two men take on other roles.

Instead of dismissing ruptures as simply part of the dramatic illusion as Moodie does, it would be far better to think of them in terms of Muecke's levels or strands of illusion. Muecke asserts that by rupturing dramatic illusion, a second fiction separate from the original fictitious events of the play is introduced. Thus, the fictional quality of the second is juxtaposed with

52. Moodie (2007) 72.

the ‘reality’ of the first.⁵³ This principle can be applied to *Frogs*. The beginning of the play sets up the first level of dramatic illusion, the ‘real’ world of Athens that Dionysos will leave behind when he goes to the Underworld. When he crosses the lake, he arrives in the Underworld, a second, separate space, one that is Aristophanes’ imagining of the Underworld. Furthermore, there is a third level of dramatic illusion that is maintained in the internal play, the *agon*.

However, these three levels of dramatic illusion are not entirely separate entities. For example, Dionysos enters both the Underworld and the theatre space of the third level when he crosses the lake, yet he is still dressed in his costume as Herakles. Therefore, he arrives in the theatre space not in the role of the *krites*, the role he plays in the internal play, but as an actor. One could call this a break in the third level of dramatic illusion. This would suggest that, just as the *external* play contains breaks in the illusion, so too can the *internal* play. This is perhaps metatheatre within metatheatre. As a result, it inspires considerable ambiguity: reality itself is questioned. What is real? The world of the play? The world of the Underworld? The world of the internal play? All these confusing realities have an important effect: there is only one reality, the world of Athens in 405 BCE, and it needs, as Dionysos thinks, salvation. Without salvation, perhaps even the world of Athens will cease to be real.

3.5 Internal Play: Immortality

An important part of the *agon* involves Aristophanes directly quoting (and humorously misquoting) Euripides’ and Aeschylus’ actual plays.⁵⁴ For example, in order to decide the winner of the *agon*, Dionysos has Euripides and Aeschylus speak lines from their plays while he weighs them. Here, Aristophanes makes direct quotations from their respective plays: for in-

53. Muecke (1977) 5–6.

54. For example, near the beginning of the play, Dionysos is lamenting the poor state of Athenian tragedy and he speaks about wanting to have a good poet who writes potent verses (96–7. The word used to describe the verses is ‘*γόνιμον*’; it usually means ‘fertile’, but I translate it here as ‘potent’ to relate this idea of biological generative power, ‘fertile’, to poetry). However, when Dionysos gives an example of a potent verse, it is a misquote of Euripides: ‘*αἰθέρα Διὸς δωμάτιον*’ (“the sky, the bedroom of Zeus”; 100). The original from Euripides’ *Melanippe the Wise* (fr. 487) said ‘*αἰθέρ’ οἴκησιν Διός*’ (“the sky, the dwelling-place of Zeus”).

stance, 'εἴθ' ὄφελ' Ἀργοῦς μὴ διαπτάσθαι σκάφος' ("Would that the ship of the Argo had never flown"; 1382) is a direct quote of Euripides' first line in *Medea*, and 'μόνος θεῶν γὰρ Θάνατος οὐ δώρων ἐρᾷ' ("for Death, alone of all the gods, does not desire gifts"; 1392) comes from Aeschylus' *Niobe* (Aesch. fr. 161.1). The concept of poetic immortality, the notion that poets and their works can survive after death, is addressed. Indeed, Aeschylus wants to think that Euripides' poetry *τούτω δὲ συντέθνηκεν* (died with him; 868–69), yet with a metatheatrical and intertextual flourish, Aristophanes is currently quoting Euripides in a play being performed. Thus the poets' works survive; *Frogs* itself immortalises them.

The concept of a play-with-a-play exemplifies the particular type of immortality that Aristophanes examines on several occasions in *Frogs*: the immortality of continued existence in the afterlife. For example, the chorus of Eleusinian initiates enjoy an afterlife of festivals and dances in celebration of Eleusinian deities. Moreover, the chorus continue to enjoy dramatic competition in the afterlife, watching, commenting, critiquing, and revelling in the drama. Therefore, the presence of an internal play helps to solidify the idea of the afterlife as a continuation of earthly life; the dead continue to exist in some form after death and pursue familiar activities. Indeed, Aeschylus' and Euripides' engagement in dramatic competition, just as they would have been accustomed to in life, exemplifies this type of immortality. This further emphasises the theme of poetic immortality, and the notion that a great poet will survive forever in some form.

The concept of theatrical immortality is also explored in the *agon* through the metatheatrical structure of a play-within-a-play. With the *agon* functioning as a play-within-a-play, it demonstrates dramatic competition continuing to take place in the Underworld. That is to say, some form of drama and performance, with deceased dramatists engaging in dramatic competition, continues after death. The theatrical world endures, complete with playwrights, plots, actors, audiences, and theatrical spaces. In this way, the world of the theatre itself is immortalised. Arguably then, this immortal theatre is a demonstration of what Dionysos hopes to achieve with his quest. If he brings back a poet capable of saving tragedy and saving the city of Athens, then theatrical productions will endure and the theatre of Athens has a future. The theatre in the Underworld therefore demonstrates the immortality Athenian theatre would achieve if Dionysos' quest is successful.

4. CONCLUSION: POETIC IMMORTALITY, THEATRICAL IMMORTALITY

Metatheatre acts in two important ways in *Frogs*: as comic entertainment and to represent theatrical immortality. The breaks in dramatic illusion, such as the opening scene, the costume play, or the *parabasis*, function to enhance the humour of the play, as well as demonstrate the importance of comedy. Even though Dionysos claims it is the return of a tragedian that will save Athens (1418–19), it is comedy that holds Athens' salvation, and it is the metatheatrical aspects of *Frogs* that demonstrate this. Indeed, Aeschylus does not win the *agon* with his exceptional skills as a tragedian, or the weight of his verses, but by providing the best advice to the city: he urges the Athenian *demos* to make effective use of the fleet in the war against Sparta, and to ignore the advice of villains and instead listen to honest men (1455–65). This advice tallies with that already given by the chorus in their metatheatrical *parabasis*, a conventional feature of Greek comedy.⁵⁵

Perhaps there is something of a melancholic and pessimistic tone registered in *Frogs*. After all, Aristophanes places the best poets, as well as an Athenian audience capable of critiquing plays (represented by the chorus of Eleusinian initiates), in the Underworld. This perhaps implies that great poets are lost forever, exemplifying what Dionysos said at the beginning of the play: there are no good poets left (71–72). However, it is the play-within-a-play of *Frogs* that resists this pessimistic tone, instead demonstrating an ideal, immortal Athens. Moreover, a vision of the best poets of Athens surviving after death is created, illustrating the immortality of the poet. By way of the internal play that takes place in the Underworld, the poets survive, continuing to engage in dramatic competition, forever immortalised. The greatest poets never truly die; death is thus no barrier to true art nor true artists.

55. Athens' financial and human resources were depleted by this point in the Peloponnesian War; despite the victory at Arginusai in 406 BCE, many lives had been lost in that battle and the resulting trial of the generals reflects the disunity of the *demos*. Aristophanes puts his city-saving advice into the mouth of Aeschylus, possibly as Aeschylus reflected an older, harmonious, victorious generation who had triumphed over the Persians. Perhaps this is why Dionysos chooses Aeschylus, despite his previous desire to bring back Euripides; however, full treatment of intricacies of Dionysos' choice of Aeschylus is beyond the scope of this article. See Bowie (1993) 237–8, Griffith (2013) 203–19, MacDowell (1995) 286–97, Panoussis (2016), Sidwell (2010) 283–98.

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