

Roasting the Bull(-Eater): Aristophanes' Treatment of Cratinus in *Frogs* 354-71

During the abusive entry song of the chorus of initiates in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, the chorus leader demands that all those who have not been initiated in 'the Bacchic rites of the tongue of bull-eating Cratinus' stand aside (357). The application of an epithet of Dionysus, 'bull-eating,' to Cratinus has been interpreted as a sign of respect, even homage, on the part of Aristophanes (e.g. Biles 2011: 231). Emmanuela Bakola even sees *Frogs* as a vindication of Cratinus' style, enacted by the victory of Aeschylus, with whom he is associated (Bakola 2010: 24-29, 66-70). I suggest (1) that the passage in question does not merely refer to Cratinus but rather imitates his style and (2) that this imitation should be understood as an insulting but ultimately good-natured 'roast' rather than straightforward emulation.

Two central features of *Frogs*—burlesque of myth and poetic criticism—are characteristically Cratinean; therefore, this comedy is particularly apt for imitation of Cratinus. *Frogs* presents a burlesque of Heracles' *katabasis* by having Dionysus, dressed as Heracles, do the job instead. The hypothesis to Cratinus' *Dionysalexander* suggests that this lost play had a very similar plot: Dionysus stands in for Paris in the abduction of Helen. Seven other plays by Cratinus are identifiable (with more or less certainty) as myth burlesques (Storey 2011). Likewise, *Frogs* brings poetic criticism to the fore in the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides. Following Bakola's analysis, I see this contest as indebted to Cratinus' *Archilochoi*, which likely featured a poetic contest pitting Archilochus against Homer and Hesiod. Other poetically critical comedies by Cratinus include his *Didaskaliai* and *Dionysoi* (fr. 38, 52 K-A).

Bearing this opportunity for imitation in mind, we may now turn to the *Frogs* passage itself. Is the series of abusive exclusions largely serious, or may we laugh at the chorus itself in addition to those whom it mocks? In the former case, the reference to Cratinus would be

unequivocal praise. In the latter, we may find the chorus' identification with Cratinus ironic (cf. Sidwell 2009: 284). Some of the groups whom the chorus denounces are genuinely unsavory: factionalists (359-60), bribe-takers (361), and traitors (362-65). However, the reference to the incontinence of Aristophanes' frequent target Cinesias (366) and the obviously biased censure of those who reduce the poets' pay (367-68) may form "a humorous anticlimax to the whole series of crimes" (Hubbard 1991: 204).

Without a preconceived notion that the chorus must be serious, we can examine more effectively the phrase 'bull-eating Cratinus' (357). The scholion on this line suggests three motives for using this epithet of Dionysus: a literary reference to Sophocles' *Tyro*, a jab at Cratinus' love of wine, and a reference to the bold, Bacchic character of this passage of *Frogs*. If we adopt Bakola's argument for a binary between old, wine-inspired poetry, à la Cratinus and Aeschylus, and new, artistic poetry à la Aristophanes and Euripides, then we may read the scholion as a testament that the passage in question imitates the style of Cratinus (cf. Crat. fr. 342 K-A; Proleg. De Com. 3). One additional piece of evidence is Aristophanes' choice to have the chorus address the audience in the second person during its entry song (370-71), a feature otherwise unattested in Aristophanes but likely for three of Cratinus' plays: *Dionysalexander*, *Plutoi*, and *Pylaea* (Storey 2011: 286, 349, 361).

The question of tone remains. We have already noted the references to Cinesias and the pay of the poets, which suggest that the chorus is not always to be taken seriously. There are several reasons to believe that irony may be at play in the epithet 'bull-eating' specifically. Although the epithet may be honorific, it may also have come across as hyperbolic. A title reserved for a god is being applied to a comic poet, one whom Aristophanes has relentlessly mocked every time he has mentioned him in the past (*Ach.* 842-53, 1164-73; *Eq.* 398-401, 526-

36; *Pax* 700-05). In addition, the scholion noted above suggests that it emphasizes Cratinus' love of wine, which was specifically mocked in *Peace*. Therefore, regardless of whether *Frogs* is a vindication of Cratinus' style, the passage in question adopts his style but also pokes fun at his flaws, roasting the bull-eater to perfection.

Bibliography

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