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μετὰ τὰ κριτικά

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Critias' *Pirithous* and Aristophanes' *Frogs*

Metatheatrical Echoes and the Critical Debate

Monica Centanni

This article addresses the topic of Metacriticism from two perspectives. First, with regard to the dialogue between ancient sources and, in particular, the dynamics of metatheatrical parody, it corroborates and extends Wilamowitz's theory that the entire first act of *Frogs* could be a parody of Critias' *Pirithous*. Second, with regard to contemporary critical debate, the article responds to recent arguments put forward by authoritative scholars who aim to refute Wilamowitz's hypothesis regarding both the (controversial) authorship of the tragedy and the idea that Aristophanes staged a specific tragic parody. The paper expands on and revises some of the points made in *Atene assoluta* (Centanni 1997, 159–219).

I. *Status quaestionis*

The first question relates to the commentary reported in *Scholia Vetera* on Aristophanes' *Frogs* concerning the work that is supposedly parodied in the scene in which Dionysus and Xanthias arrive in the Underworld. Commenting on lines 464 ff. of *Frogs*, the Scholiast refers five times to Euripides' *Theseus*, which the comedy is said to parody: scholia on lines 465a, 465b, 471a, 473, and 475a (Chantry 1999, 71–72; actually, the reference to Euripides' *Theseus* in scholium 465b is uncertain and has been added by conjecture: λέγ(ει) <Θησεὺς παρ' Εύριπίδη?> πρὸς τὸν Μίνωα).

The second question concerns the potential overlap between Euripides' *Theseus* and another tragedy, *Pirithous*, which ancient critics attributed to either Euripides or Critias. In particular:

Vita Euripidis IA, 9, 28–29

τὰ πάντα δ' ἦν αὐτοῦ δράματα ἥβ' [92], σώζεται δὲ οη̄ [78]. τούτων νοθεύεται τρία, Τέννης
Προδόμανθος Πειρίθους

TrGF V, T A1 (Kannicht 2004, 47)

Athenaeus XI, 496b

ο τὸν Πειρίθουν γράψας εἴτε Κριτίας ἐστὶν ὁ τύραννος ἡ Έυριπίδης

F 2 Boschi (Boschi 2021a, 77) = DK 88 B 17 = *TrGF* I, 43 F 2 (Snell, Kannicht 1986, 173)

In ms. Vat. gr. 2228, f. 482 r, Iohannes Diaconus, commenting on Hermogenes, recounts the *argumentum of Pirithous*:

ή μὲν οὖν τοῦ Πειρίθου ύπόθεσίς ἐστιν αὕτη· Πειρίθους ἐπὶ τὴν Περσεφόνης μνηστείαν μετὰ Θησέως εἰς Ἀιδου καταβάς τιμωρίας ἔτυχε τῆς πρεπούσης αὐτὸς μὲν γάρ ἐπὶ πέτρας ἀκινήτῳ καθέδρᾳ πιεδηθεὶς δρακόντων ἐφρουρεῖτο χάσμασιν, Θησεὺς δὲ τὸν φίλον ἐγκαταλιπεῖν αἰσχρὸν ἡγούμενος βίου είλετο τὴν ἐν "Αἰδου ζωήν. ἐπὶ τὸν Κέρβερον δὲ Ἡρακλῆς ἀποσταλεῖς ὑπὸ Εύρυσθέως τοῦ μὲν Θηρίου βίᾳ περιεγένετο, τοὺς δὲ περὶ Θησέα χάριτι τῶν χθονίων θεῶν τῆς παρούσης ἀνάγκης ἐξέλυσεν, μιᾷ πράξει καὶ τὸν ἀνθιστάμενον χειρωσάμενος καὶ παρὰ θεῶν χάριν λαβών καὶ δυστυχοῦντας ἐλέήσας φίλους.

T1 Boschi (Boschi 2021a, 41) = DK 88 B 16 = *TrGF I*, 43 F 1 (Snell, Kannicht, 1986, 171-172).

The following is the most substantial part of the drama preserved by tradition. These are the lines in which, according to Iohannes Diaconus, Aeacus addresses Heracles:

Εἰσάγεται γοῦν ἐν τούτῳ τῷ δράματι Αἰακὸς πρὸς Ἡρακλέα λέγων

– ἔα, τί χρῆμα; δέρκομαι σπουδῇ τινα
δεῦρο ἐγκονοῦντα καὶ μάλιστα φρενί.
εἰπεῖν δίκαιον, ὡς ξέν', ὅστις ὧν τόπους
εἰς τούσδε χρίμπτῃ καὶ καθ' ἥντιν' αἰτίαν.
εἴτα Ἡρακλῆς πρὸς αὐτόν·
– οὐδεὶς ὄκνος πάντ' ἐκκαλύψασθαι λόγον·
ἐμοὶ πατρὶς μὲν "Αργος, ὄνομα δ'" Ἡρακλῆς,
θεῶν δὲ πάντων πατρός ἐξέφυν Διός·
ἔμη γάρ ἥλθε κεδνῇ μητρὶ εἰς λέχος
Ζεύς, ὡς λέλεκται τῆς ἀληθείας ὑπο·
ἥκω δὲ δεῦρο πρὸς βίαν, Εύρυσθέως
ἀρχαῖς ὑπείκων, ὃς μὲν ἐπεμψεῖς "Αἰδου κύνα
ἄγειν κελεύων ζῶντα πρὸς Μυκηνίδας
πύλας, ιδεῖν μὲν οὐ θέλων, ἀθλον δέ μοι
ἀνήνυτον τόνδινον ὕιετος ἐξημρηκέναι.
τοιόνδινον ἰχνεύων πράγος Εύρωπης κύκλῳ
Ἀσίας τε πάσσης ἐς μυχοὺς ἐλήλυθα.

F 1 Boschi (Boschi 2021a, 61) = DK 88 B 16 = *TrGF I*, 43 F 1 (Snell, Kannicht 1986, 172)

In 1875, Wilamowitz developed a hypothesis previously put forward by Fritzsche and proposed the idea of a tragic parody of *Pirithous* in *Frogs*, strongly advocating the attribution of the tragedy to Critias (Wilamowitz 1875, 171; and the prior notes to *Frogs*, 470-478, in Fritzsche 1845, 206-208). In parallel, Van de Sande Bakhuyzen expressed scepticism regarding the scholia, highlighting the challenge of connecting *Theseus* and *Frogs*, and casting doubt on the reliability of the scholia's account and the similarities between the two texts (Van de Sande Bakhuyzen 1877, 141 ff.). The objections raised regarding the relevance of the link suggested by the scholia can be summarised into four main points:

1) Euripides' *Theseus* is not set in Hades. As far as can be reconstructed from the surviving fragments, the drama was set in Crete and centred on the hero's liberation of the young men destined to be eaten by the Minotaur. As is well known, in the most substantial passage of the *Theseus* quoted by Athenaeus (X, 454b-c), an illiterate shepherd sees the hero's ship ap-

proaching, and describes the shape of the letters ΘΗΣΕΥΣ engraved on the side, but does not recognise their meaning. From a quotation provided by Tzetzes and the surviving fragments, we can infer that Euripides' tragedy was set in Crete, and that the scene in which the shepherd describes the shape of the letters takes place on one of the island's beaches (see Kannicht 2004, 428);

2) Even if we concede that, in a lost episode of the tragedy, Theseus was in the Underworld (or recalled an adventure there), the context of the dialogue between Theseus and Minos would differ greatly from that between Dionysus and Aeacus at the gates of Hades;

3) In *Frogs*, Dionysus takes on the role of Heracles, not Theseus.

4) The scholia to *Frogs* 471a-b read: ἐκ Θησέως Εύριπίδου. καὶ τὰ μὲν ἔσωτῷ πλάττων λέγει, τὰ δὲ ἐξ Εύριπίδου (a), πρὸς φόβον Διονύσου (b), and then, on *Frogs* 473, quote Eur. fr. 386c Kannicht (= 383-384 Nauck), in which the rare adjective αἰμοσταγεῖς appears (echoed by Aristophanes' αἰματοσταγῆς).

The verb πλάττειν should refer to the reworking of the plot, thereby constituting a link between the plots of *Theseus* and Aristophanes' *Frogs*. However, perhaps the grammarian who wrote the scholion identified the verbal coincidence of the adjective αἰμ(ατ)οσταγῆς/ές both in *Frogs* and in *Theseus*, pointing it out and extending the recurrence of the single word to the plot of Euripides' tragedy as a whole.

In addition to the pages he dedicates to *Pirithous* in *Analecta Euripidea*, Wilamowitz returns to the subject in his monograph on Euripides' *Herakles*:

Wir sehen auch an den dadurch angeregten *Fröschen* des Aristophanes, dass die Erfindung selbst dem Komiker, der den Bombast verspottete, imponirt hat. [...] Aiakos und der Mystenchor, die unabhängig von den *Fröschen* bezeugt sind [...] garantiren die Abhängigkeit der *Frösche* und bestätigen so meine Vermutung, dass die aristophanische Aiakoscene den Kritias parodiert [...] (Wilamowitz 1895², 158 and footnote)

Wilamowitz then reaffirms the idea several times in his writings, thus suggesting corruption in the scholia, which should be read as ἐπὶ Θησεῖ, rather than ἐν Θησεῖ (the same arguments are in Wilamowitz 1927, 291-292) as in the manuscripts. In other words, the scholium should be read as "de *Theseo*, in *Pirithoo* scilicet fabula" instead of "in *Theseo*" (so van Leeuwen 1896, 79). Wilamowitz goes so far as to suggest an attribution of some fragments handed down as Euripides' *Theseus* to Critias' *Pirithous*: "Thesei fragmenta 386, 387, 388 ad *Pirithoum* refero" (Wilamowitz 1875, 172; on the matter, see Sutton 1978). Furthermore, he reconstructs a trilogy by Critias, of which *Pirithous* would be one part, alongside *Radamanthus* and *Tennes*; the fourth play, intended as a satyric drama, would be *Sisyphus*, related to Critias' fragment about the invention of God by a "wise man" aiming to instil fear in humans (*TrGF* I, 43 F 19: Snell, Kannicht 1986, 180-182 = DK 88 B 25). The Sisyphus fragment quoted by Sextus Empiricus is also a widely debated topic among critics (for a detailed analysis, see Cipolla 2003, 225-269).

Wilamowitz's hypothesis that Critias was the author not only of the *Pirithous* fragments, but also of a complete dramatic tetralogy including the *Tennes*, *Radamanthus* and *Sisyphus* as the Satyric drama, was bound to spark debate among critics (see Alvoni 2008 for an overview of the key points of the critical debate, beginning with Kuiper in 1907). In 1994, the journal "Mnemosyne" published the correspondence between Wilamowitz and Kuiper (for an overview of the importance of Wilamowitz's "Memorandum u"ber die Peirithoosfrage", see Bremer and Calder 1994. Alvoni 2011 provides an accurate reconstruction of the scholars' arguments). In recent decades, the debate has been revived, with important contributions summarising the critics' positions. The following table supplements and updates Collard's valuable review (presented in his 1995 and then 2007 editions), and provides an overview of the heated debate among scholars from the beginning to the present day.

CRITIAS	uncertain	EURIPIDES
		VALCKENAER 1767
		NAUCK 1856, 1889 ²
WILAMOWITZ 1875, 1895 ²		
DIELS 1903		KUIPER 1907
WILAMOWITZ 1907		
WILAMOWITZ 1927	HUNT 1927	
PICKARD-CAMBRIDGE 1933		
KRANZ in D.-K., vs		
1935.1952 ⁶		
NESTLE 1940	SCHMID 1940	PAGE 1942
BATTEGAZZORE 1962		VYSOKY 1964
WEBSTER 1967	ARRIGHETTI 1964	
DEFRADAS 1967		
de ROMILLY 1968		
CARLINI 1968		
BATTEGAZZORE 1970	COCKLE 1970	
SNELL 1971		
DOVER 1975	LESKY 1972 ³	
		DIHLE 1977
PANCENKO 1980	SUTTON 1978	
SNELL, KANNICHT 1981	SUTTON 1981	SCODEL 1980

WEST 1983	COCKLE 1983	METTE 1983
KNOX 1985		
SNELL, KANNICHT 1986		
WINIARCZYK 1987		SUTTON 1987
		YUNIS 1988
BATTEGAZZORE 1989	DAVIES 1989	
GAULY 1991		
DOVER 1993		COLLARD 1995
OBBINK 1996		
KANNICHT 1996		
SOMMERSTEIN 1996		
CENTANNI 1997		KAHN 1997
		PECHSTEIN 1998
BULTRIGHINI 1999		KRUMEICH, PECHSTEIN, SEIDENSTICKER
		1999
		CLARK 2000
		DOBROV 2001
IANNUCCI 2002		
	EGLI 2003	
	ALVONI 2006	LLOYD-JONES 2006
		COLLARD 2007
	ALVONI 2008, 2011	COLLARD, CROPP 2008
CARLINI 2012		
	BREMMER 2015	
ANGIÒ 2020	CROPP 2020, 2021	
BOSCHI 2021a, 2021b	CARRARA 2021,	
		2024

As can be seen, the critical discussion is very lively and remains controversial. An important turning point that reignited the debate was Dana Ferrin Sutton's work in 1987, in which he re-examined the sources and fragments and once again proposed Euripides as the author of the drama (Sutton 1987, 5-106; see also Sutton 1978 on Euripides' *Theseus*). The arguments put forward by Sutton to return the attribution of *Pirithous* to Euripides are essentially of two types:

- 1) Trust in ancient sources that mention "*Pirithous* by Euripides" more often than "*Pirithous* by Critias" (with regard to the fragments usually attributed to *Pirithous*), thus hypothesising a

lost *Pirithous* by Critias, which would have caused confusion in later sources; and 2) Internal evidence, including stylistic and lexical evidence, that demonstrate strong similarities with Euripides' texts, and Euripidean stylistic features and lexemes that are recognisable in *Pirithous*: the style and lexicon of *Sisyphus*, attributable with certainty to Critias, are completely different. It is the same argument of the "Euripidean colour" invoked by Kuiper in 1907 to attribute *Pirithous*' authorship to Euripides. Sutton's methodology has been the subject of some harsh criticism:

Literary analysis of the kind attempted here has little value if it is not quantitatively precise and/or qualitatively sensitive. This study is neither. It is indefensible that in a computer-aided work such vague expressions as 'repeatedly', 'much more frequently', 'the number... is impressive' are used (pp. 34, 55, 60-1) [...]. It is useless to point coincidences in phraseology without distinguishing between common and colourful expressions [...]. There are misprints and wrong references throughout (Craik 1988, 399).

Along the same lines, with even harsher criticism, Harder 1990 concludes, "In conclusion: this book is best left unread" (Harder 1990, 205).

Despite more than a century of debate, the question of the tragedy's authorship remains unresolved, with neither the arguments for Euripides nor those for Critias being conclusive. In 2012, Carlini confirmed the attribution of two new papyrus fragments to *Pirithous*. He summarised the debate on attribution, recalling Albin Lesky's position in favour of Critias' authorship. Carlini also dismissed the weak "sonus sermonis" argument, which various scholars have invoked as evidence of Euripides' authorship. Proof of the difficulty in settling the question is the hypothesis proposed by Wilamowitz that Euripides wrote *Pirithous*, but Critias suggested the plot (and perhaps the entire tetralogy). While this idea is far-fetched to the point of being untenable, it demonstrates how challenging it is to definitively rule out Critias' involvement based on the available data. In his 2012 contribution to the small corpus of *Pirithous* texts, Carlini quotes a note by E.G. Turner from a 1969 correspondence (Carlini 2012, 188 ff.). Commenting on the attribution of one of the fragments to *Pirithous*, Turner observed that the main argument against Euripides was the static nature of the on-stage action ("the events seem to be so utterly static"). The style of the tragedy's dramatic writing must be taken into account, as it is a much less discretionary and subjective element than the "sound" or "colour" of Euripides' writing, which can be found in the lexis of the few fragments of the drama.

There has been no improvement in the uncertainty and disagreement among critics discussing the topic since the end of the 20th Century. In fact, the situation has probably worsened. However, as can be seen from the table, doubts about the attribution of the drama to Euripides seem to have regained the upper hand recently. Indeed, there is also a tendency to return to the idea that Critias was the tragedy's author, as Wilamowitz suggested.

Martin Cropp has recently revisited the issue of the tragedy's paternity, expressing serious doubts about the attribution of *Pirithous* to Critias, and strongly criticising the hypothesis that

Pirithous could be parodied in *Frogs* (Cropp 2020). Cropp's arguments can be summarised as follows:

- The name 'Aeacus' (mentioned by Critias' fragment source) does not appear in the text of *Frogs*;
- The similarities between *Frogs* and what we know of *Pirithous* are very limited;
- A tradition of Heracles' *katabasis*, including his initiation at Eleusis and the rescue of Theseus, probably emerged already in the sixth century; there is nothing in *Frogs* that cannot be explained by this tradition, rather than by dependence on *Pirithous*;
- The Chorus of Initiates that greets Heracles/Dionysus in each play was probably part of this earlier tradition;
- References to *Pirithous*' plot are notably absent from *Frogs*' scholia;
- *Frogs* has a typical comic doorkeeper scene. In *Pirithous*, however, Aeacus is already present when Heracles arrives. He has probably delivered the prologue speech and may continue to play an important part in the tragedy.

Therefore, in Cropp's opinion, Wilamowitz's argument about *Pirithous* is an example of "circular reasoning" (Cropp 2020, 246-247). There is no evidence that the Aeacus in *Pirithous* behaved like the doorkeeper in Aristophanes' play, nor is this at all likely. Furthermore, the assumption that the descent of Dionysus/Heracles in *Frogs* was modelled on that of Heracles in *Pirithous* is unnecessary, since the pattern of Heracles' *katabasis* was much older. However, it should be noted that Cropp himself had provisionally accepted the attribution to Critias, using the formula "Critias(?) in his edition of fragments by Minor Greek Tragedians (Cropp 2019, 180 ff.).

II. Echoes of *Pirithous* in *Frogs*. A Dramaturgical Analysis

The critical question is therefore open and twofold, concerning both the attribution of *Pirithous* to Euripides or Critias, and the possible relationship between the tragedy and *Frogs*. The heated, century-long debate on the authorship of the drama and the possible parody in *Frogs* has at least assisted an in-depth examination of the issues, clearing the critical field by excluding some methodologically weak arguments and including others. In particular:

- the quantity and quality of the arguments casting doubt on *Frogs* being a parody of *Theseus* are solid enough: the plot of Euripides' tragedy differs significantly from that of the comedy in terms of setting and characters;
- it is not possible to rely on infra-textual or stylistic evidence to attribute *Pirithous*' authorship either to Euripides or Critias, given the scarcity of the surviving fragments. The lexicon, the "sonus sermonis" the Euripidean (or not) "colour" do not seem to be worthy considerations.

At this stage of the debate, it is worth conducting a dramaturgical analysis by comparing the plot and the unfolding of the tragedy *Pirithous*, as set out in the *argumentum*, with the plot and text of *Frogs*.

Dramatic analysis seems to be the only method we have at our disposal to find any points of contact between the two dramas. I therefore present a table below that highlights the parallels between *Frogs* and *Pirithous*, based on our limited knowledge of the tragedy, focusing on the characters and plot twists (ἥθη and μῦθος, as Aristotle would say). The table outlines the most evident parallels.

loci parallelī	
Pirithous	Frogs
<i>katabasis</i> of Heracles	<i>katabasis</i> of Dionysus (with Xanthias) disguised as Heracles
The capture of Cerberus the main purpose for Heracles' descent into the Underworld	The rescue of a great poet from back to life the main purpose of Dionysus' descent into the Underworld
Outcome Cerberus is captured by force, but Heracles also obtains, through the grace of Persephone and Hades, the liberation of Theseus and Pirithous	Outcome Dionysus obtains permission from Pluto to bring back to life Aeschylus, the poet who won the contest
Chorus composed of Mystai	Chorus composed of Mystai at the gates of the Underworld [First Chorus: composed of the Frogs of the Styx]
Ath. XI, 496a-b πλημοχόν ... χρώνται δὲ αὔτῷ (scil. τῷ σκεύει) ἐν Ἐλευσῖνι τῇ τελευταίᾳ τῶν μυστηρίων ἡμέρᾳ, ἦν καὶ απ' αὐτοῦ προσαγορεύουσι Πλημοχόας [...] ἵνα πλημοχόας τάσδ' εἰς χθόνιον χάσμ' εύφημως προχέωμεν	From the <i>argumentum</i> : τοὺς μύστας παρ' αὐτάς τάς πύλας τοῦ Ἀιδου χορεύοντας
F 2 Boschi (Boschi 2021a, 77-82) = DK 88 B 17 = TrGF I, 43 F 2 (Snell, Kannicht 1986, 173)	Ξανθίας τί εστιν; Διόνυσος οὐ κατήκουσας; Ξανθίας τίνος; Διόνυσος αὐλῶν πνοῆς. Ξανθίας ἔγωγε, καὶ δόξων γέ με αὔρα τις εἰσεπνευσε μυστικωτάτη. Διόνυσος ἀλλ' ἡρεμί πτήξαντες ἀκροασώμεθα. Frogs, 312 ff.
The violent and brutal manners of the Centaurs At some point during the tragedy, it is highly probable that the famous struggle of Theseus and Pirithous against the Centaurs at Pirithous' wedding was recalled.	sch. ad locum: μυστικωτάτη τῶν ἐν Ἐλευσῖνι μυστηρίων. sch. at l. 316: μετεβλήθη τῶν μυστῶν ὁ χορός κενταυρικῶς (the Centaur manner) [Heracles addressing Dionysus who knocks on his door] τίς τὴν θύραν ἐπάταξεν; ὡς κενταυρικῶς ἐνῆλαθ' ὄστις. Frogs, 38 f.
	sch. ad locum: καὶ τοῦτο οἶδεν Ἡρακλῆς ἐκ τῆς πρὸς αὐτοὺς μάχης

Pirithous

The capture of Cerberus

This is the first reason for Heracles' descent into the Underworld in *Pirithous*.

From the *argumentum*: ἐπὶ τὸν Κέρβερον δὲ
Ἡρακλῆς ἀποσταλεῖς ὑπὸ Εὔρυσθέως τοῦ μὲν
Θηρίου βίᾳ περιεγένετο [...]

Frogs

The (former) capture of Cerberus

[Dionysus asks Heracles for directions for travelling to the Underworld, based on his previous descent for Cerberus]

ἀλλ᾽ ὥντερ ἔνεκα τῆγδε τὴν σκευὴν ἔχων
ἡλθον κατὰ σὴν μίμησιν, ἵνα μοι τοὺς ξένους
τοὺς σοὺς φράσειας, εἰ δεοίμην, οἷοι σὺ
ἐχρῶ τόθ', ἡνίκ' ἐπὶ τὸν Κέρβερον,
τούτους φράσον μοι, λιμένας, ἀρτοπώλια,
πορνεῖ, ἀναπαύλας, ἐκτροπάς, κρήνας, ὄδοις,
πόλεις, διαίτας, πανδοκευτρίας, ὅπου
κόρεις ὄλιγιστοι.

Frogs, 108 ff.

[The Gatekeeper addresses Dionysus/Heracles]

ὦ βδελυρέ κάνασσοντε καὶ τολμηρέ σὺ
καὶ μιαρέ καὶ παμμιάρε καὶ μιαρώτατε,
ὅς τὸν κύν' ἡμῶν ἔξελάσας τὸν Κέρβερον
ἀπῆξας ἄγγων κάποδράς ψχου λαβών,
ὄν ἐγώ 'φύλαττον.

Frogs, 465 ff.

δεῦρ' εἰσιθι: the second visit of Heracles/Dionysus into the Underworld

[The Servant addresses Dionysus/Heracles]

ὦ φίλαθ' ἥκεις Ἡράκλεις; δεῦρ' εἰσιθι.
ἡ γάρ θεός σ' ὡς ἐπύθεθ' ἥκοντ', εὐθέως
ἐπεπτεν ἄρτους, ἥψε κατερεικτῶν χύτρας
ἔτνους δύ' ἦ τρεῖς, βοῦν ἀπηνθράκις" ὅλον,
πλακοῦντας ὥππα κολλάβους. ἀλλ' εἰσιθι.

Frogs, 503 ff.

The increased loot

Dionysus/Heracles, treated as a thief.

[Hostess addresses Dionysus/Heracles]

νῶ δέ δεισάσσα γέ που
ἐπὶ τὴν κατήλιφ' εὐθὺς ἀνεπηδήσαμεν-
ό δ' ὥχετ' ἐξέξας γε τὰς ψιάθους λαβών.
Frogs, 565-567

sch. ad locum: νομίζουσι Ἡρακλέα τὸν Διόνυσον
εῖναι ὡς ἡρωακότα τὰ χρειώδη καθ' ἄιδου ὅτε
κατῆλθεν ἐπὶ τὸν Κέρβερον.

[the Gatekeeper to Dionysus/Heracles]
ξυνδεῖτε ταχέως τουτονὶ τὸν κυνοκλόπον,
ἵνα δῷ δίκην. ἀνύετον.

Frogs, 605-606

Pirithous

The benevolence of Pluto and Persephone in allowing Heracles to bring back to life both the heroes, Theseus and Pirithous

From the *argumentum*: [...] χάριτι τῶν χθονίων θεῶν ... καὶ παρὰ θεῶν χάριν λαβών καὶ δυστυχοῦντας ἐλεήσας φίλους.

Frogs

The benevolence of Pluto in allowing Dionysus to bring back to life the best poet, whichever one he preferred

Πλούτων | [...] λαβὼν ἄπει,
όπότερον ἄν κρίνης, ἵν' ἔλθης μὴ μάτην.
Frogs, 1415 f.

III. Traces of Critias, both as a poet and as a political leader, in *Frogs*

The comedy also contains allusions to the contemporary political situation that are closely linked to Critias. For example, see the allusion at line 47, when Heracles addresses Dionysus:

ἀλλ' οὐχ οἵος τ' εἴμ' ἀποσοβῆσαι τὸν γέλων
όρῶν λεοντῆν ἐπὶ κροκωτῷ κειμένην.
τίς ὁ νοῦς; τί κόθορνος καὶ ρόπαλον ξυνηλθέτην;
Frogs, 45 ff.

sch. ad loc.: ὅτι ὁ κόθορνος εἰς ἀμφοτέρους τοὺς πόδας ἀρμόζει. ἐνθεν καὶ Θηραμένης κόθορνος λέγεται.

The allusion is to Dionysus' disguise as Heracles, but, as the scholium reveals, it is also to Theramenes, the so-called "cothurnus" (cf. Xenophon, *Hell.* II, 3, 31), and most likely to his complicity with Critias in the same political faction during the troubled years of the Athenian *stasis* that preceded the Thirty Tyrants regime led by Critias and Theramenes themselves. See also the explicit attack on Theramenes' opportunism and political flip-flopping in the verses recited by the Chorus:

ταῦτα μὲν πρὸς ἀνδρός ἐστι
νοῦν ἔχοντος καὶ φρένας καὶ
πολλὰ περιπεπλευκότος,
μετακυλίνδειν αὐτὸν ἀσει
πρὸς τὸν εὖ πράττοντα τοῖχον
μᾶλλον ἢ γεγραμμένην
εἰκόν' ἔσταναι, λαβόνθ' ἐν
οχῆμα: τὸ δὲ μεταστρέφεοθαι
πρὸς τὸ μαλθακώτερον
δεξιοῦ πρὸς ἀνδρός ἐστι
καὶ φύσει Θηραμένους.
Frogs, 534 ff.

sch. at l. 540a σκώπτει αὐτὸν ὡς εύμετάβολον ὄντα καὶ πρὸς τὸν καιρὸν ἀρμόζοντα.

From line 354 onwards, the Chorus denounces those who cause unrest in the city and those who collaborate with the Enemy:

εύφημεῖν χρὴ κακίστασθαι τοῖς ἡμετέροισι χοροῖσιν,
[...]

ἡ βωμολόχοις ἔπεσιν χαίρει μὴ 'ν καιρῷ τοῦτο ποιοῦσιν,
ἡ στάσιν ἔχθρὸν μὴ καταλύει μηδ' εὔκολός ἐστι πολίταις,
ἀλλ' ἀνεγείρει καὶ ρίπιζει κερδῶν ἴδιων ἐπιθυμῶν,
ἡ τῆς πόλεως χειμαζομένης ἀρχῶν καταδωροδοκεῖται,
ἡ προδίδωσιν φρούριον ἡ ναῦς [...]
ἡ χρήματα ταῖς τῶν ἀντιπάλων ναυσὶν παρέχειν τινὰ πείθει,
ἡ κατατιλῆ τῶν Ἐκατείων κυκλίοισι χοροῖσιν ὑπόδων,
ἡ τοὺς μισθούς τῶν ποιητῶν ῥήτωρ ὥν εἴτ' ἀποτρώγει,
κωμῳδηθεῖς ἐν ταῖς πατρίοις τελεταῖς ταῖς τοῦ Διονύσου.
τούτοις αὐδῶ καῦθις ἀπαυδῶ καῦθις τὸ τρίτον μάλ' ἀπαυδῶ
ἐξιστασθαι μύσταισι χοροῖς.

Frogs, 354 ff.

The combination of poetic and political criticism identifies a group of individuals who:

- undermine the canons of true and serious poetry with ‘catchy’ verses;
- stir up hatred between the parties for their own benefit and against the city’s interests;
- maintain various kinds of relations (tactical, military, or commercial) with the Spartan enemies;
- commit sacrilegious acts “against the statues of Hecate” in *komoi* by singing dithyrambs;
- despite being a “rhetorician” (i.e. someone who plays politics: “*fa politica*” as Dario Del Corno brilliantly translates), the person they attack is labelled a poet and pockets the poets’ fees. This is why he is mocked during the Dionysian festivals.

For all these reasons, people with such personalities are kindly asked not to participate in the “Sacred Choirs of the Initiates”.

As Del Corno wrote, they are: “Allusioni personali che erano di immediata identificazione per il pubblico” (Del Corno 1985, 176). In light of the above, it is difficult not to recognise these implicit allusions as clear references to Critias and his circle. The definition of an unscrupulous ‘rhetorician’/politician, who deals with the enemy by “ceding fortresses” and practises poetry by “stealing the craft” and pay of poets, fits Critias perfectly. If the reference to sacrilege against the statues of Hecate is directed generically at Cinesias, the dithyrambographer, as indicated by the scholia, then the most serious example of a sacrilege would undoubtedly still be fresh in the memory of the Athenians: the mutilation of the Hermae. Andocides (*De Myst.*, 45, 47, 68) attests to Critias’ involvement in the Hermocopides affair, one of the most infamous acts of sacrilege at the time (cf. Philostratus, *Vitae Soph.* I, 16, in which he perhaps confuses different episodes when citing the otherwise inexplicable προυδίδου δὲ τὰ ιερά as a misdeed of Critias).

Conversely, from lines 686 onwards, the Chorus emphasises a theme that was at the centre of political debate during that period: the revocation of *atimia* and the restoration of civil rights for all citizens.

[...] πρῶτον οὖν ἡμῖν δοκεῖ
ἐξισῶσαι τοὺς πολίτας κάφελεν τὰ δείματα.

sch. ad loc.:

- 688a ἔξισῶσαι τοὺς πολίτας τουτέστιν ἐντίμους ποιῆσαι τοὺς ἀτίμωθέντας'. τοιαύτη γὰρ κατάστασις ἐνειστήκει, καθ' ἥνέφυγαδεύθησάν τινες τῶν πολιτῶν καὶ ἄτιμοι ἐγένοντο.
- 688b [ἔξισῶσαι τοὺς πολίτας]: δημοκρατίαν ποιῆσαι.
- 688c ἀφελεῖν τὰ δείματα· τὰς ἀτιμίας λέγει.
- 688d ἀφελεῖν τὰ δείματα· τοὺς φόβους ἀφελεῖν ἀπὸ τοῦ εὐλαβουμένων.

The topic is summarised in the following passage from the *argumentum*:

Ἐν δὲ τούτῳ, ὁ μὲν τῶν μυστῶν χορὸς περὶ τοῦ τὴν πολιτείαν ἔξισῶσαι καὶ τοὺς ἀτίμους ἐντίμους ποιῆσαι χάτερων τινῶν πρὸς τὴν τῶν Αθηναίων πόλιν διαλέγεται.

(Arg. 14-16 = Chantry 1999, 1).

As noted by scholars in their commentaries *ad locum*, the reference to the need to restore equality among all citizens could refer to the restoration of civil rights compromised by the regime of the Four Hundred in 411 BCE, in which Callaeschrus, the father of Critias, and perhaps Critias himself, had been involved. Aristophanes appears to be proposing a slogan for the pacification of the city-state, which, by resolving the situation of revenge and partisan conflict (the στάσις ἔχθρά referred to in line 359), could avert the risk of an anti-democratic takeover. In this sense, the scholia correctly interpret that “removing all fear” from citizens would avert the danger of impending war.

This appeal for moderation and pacification is diametrically opposed to the positions of those who derive personal advantage from civil discord, a group attacked by the comedian in lines 358 ff. In opposition to a strategy of exacerbating past and ongoing grudges in order to prepare the ground for an oligarchic coup, Aristophanes proposes a wise ‘soft’ approach, aimed at demotivating the oligarchic faction and its wider supporters, who were harmed by the radicalism of Cleophon’s restoration in 409-407 BCE. So Canfora 2001, 207:

La parabasi delle *Rane* è tra i testi più esplicativi sul piano politico. [...] Il suo [di Aristofane] intervento è un *plaidoyer* in favore della piena riabilitazione di coloro – ed erano tanti – che, avendo ricoperto cariche e pubbliche funzioni sotto i Quattrocento, erano da cinque anni in una sorta di limbo politico; e inoltre in favore di un generale remissione di tutte le condanne all’*atimia*.

Another theme that could be connected to the myth of Pirithous is the concept and recurrent motif of the expelled body. In lines 689 ff., the Chorus recites:

κεῖ τις ἥμαρτε σφαλείς τι Φρυνίχου παλαιόμασιν,
ἐγγενέσθαι φημι χρῆναι τοῖς ὄλισθοῦσιν τότε
αἰτίαν ἐκθεῖσι λῦσαι τὰς πρότερον ὄμαρτίας.
εἴτ' ἄτιμόν φημι χρῆναι μηδέν' εἰν' ἐν τῇ πόλει.
καὶ γὰρ αἰσχρόν ἔστι τοὺς μὲν ναυμαχήσαντας μίαν
καὶ Πλαταιάς εύθυς είναι κάντι δούλων δεσπότας.
Frogs, 689 ff.

sch. at I. 689b Ἰσως καὶ ἐνταῦθα περὶ τῶν δὲ λέγει στρατηγῶν, τῶν σωθέντων ἐκ τῶν δέκα τῶν περὶ Ἀργίνουσαν ναυμαχήσαντων.

The reference to Phrynicus (here referring to the strategist, rather than the tragedian, as the scholia suggest) highlights the climate of resentment and revenge that preceded and followed the oligarchic regime of the Four Hundred (for the most recent insights the identity of the “Phrynicus” referred to in *Frogs*, see Lewis 2023, especially pages 44 onwards). Phrynicus had been executed in 411 by a democratic decree for his pro-Lacedaemonian activities (he had been one of the leaders of the Four Hundred), and following Critias’ proposal he was condemned again, *post mortem*, for treason and his body was disinterred and removed from Athenian territory.

ψηφίζεται ὁ δῆμος Κριτίου εἰπόντος, τὸν μὲν νεκρὸν (Phrynicus, died 411) κρίνειν προδοσίας, καὶ δόξῃ προδότης ὃν ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τεθάφθαι, τά γε ὅστα αύτοῦ ἀνορύξαι καὶ ἐξορίσαι ἔξω τῆς Ἀττικῆς. DK 88 A 7 [= Lycurg. Leocr. 113]

It should be remembered that Phrynicus had been the fiercest opponent of the revocation of the exile ban issued against Alcibiades two years earlier. Perhaps Critias’ proposal concerning Phrynicus’ corpse, laden with strong symbolic significance, skilfully paved the way for another proposal he would put forward to the democratic assembly in those years: the revocation of the ban on Alcibiades, which Critias himself had proposed in 407 (on the theme of the “expelled body” see now Boschi 2020 and 2021b, with updated Bibliography).

What is certain is that Critias is not mentioned in *Frogs*, not even in the list of poets more verbose than Euripides: Agathon, Xenocles, Pythangelus and other poets quoted in *Frogs* at II. 83 ff. “so verbose that they leave Euripides far behind”. Even though he was undoubtedly connected to Euripides in terms of ideas and poetic and philosophical inspiration, the name of Critias does not appear (for enlightening insights into the strict and necessary relationship between Euripides and Critias, as well as the ideological motivations behind Aristophanes’ attacks, see Canfora 2001, 196-218).

However, for whatever an *argumentum e silentio* may be worth, perhaps we should not underestimate the significance of the very eloquent silence surrounding a name that was undoubtedly on everyone’s mind at that time, for both poetic and political reasons.

In terms of poetic fame, I believe evidence of Critias’ reputation as a tragedian can also be found in the metaphors and direct references to theatrical experience in two of Plato’s dialogues in which Critias appears as a *persona loquens*. In *Charmides*, the young protagonist attempts to define *sophrosyne*, frequently glancing at his uncle Critias as if seeking his approval. His behaviour suggests to those present that he is merely repeating what he has learnt from his uncle. At one point, Critias impatiently interrupts him and starts speaking in the first person, “like a poet with an actor who mistreats his verses”.

καὶ ὁ Κριτίας δῆλος μὲν ἦν καὶ πάλαι ἀγωνιῶν καὶ φιλοτίμως πρός τε τὸν Χαρμίδην καὶ πρὸς τοὺς παρόντας ἔχων, μόγις δὲ ἐαυτὸν ἐν τῷ πρόσθεν κατέχων τότε οὐχ οἶσις τε ἐγένετο· δοκεῖ γάρ μοι

παντὸς μᾶλλον ἀληθὲς εἶναι, ὁ ἐγὼ ὑπέλαβον, τοῦ Κριτίου ἀκηκοέναι τὸν Χαρμίδην ταύτην τὴν ἀπόκρισιν περὶ τῆς σωφροσύνης, ὁ μὲν οὖν Χαρμίδης βουλόμενος μὴ αὐτὸς ὑπέχειν λόγον ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνον τῆς ἀποκρίσεως, ὑπεκίνει αὐτὸν ἐκεῖνον, καὶ ἐνεδείκνυτο ὡς ἐξεληγμένος εἰη· ὁ δ' οὐκ ἡνέσχετο, ὅλλα μοι ἔδοξεν ὄργισθῆναι αὐτῷ ὥσπερ ποιητῆς ὑποκριτῆς κακῶς διατιθέντι τὰ ἔαυτοῦ ποιήματα.

(Plato, *Charm.* 162c-d).

References to theatrical experience can also be found in a passage from the beginning of *Critias*. Socrates invites Critias to speak after Timaeus, comparing those present to a demanding audience after an admirable performance by the first poet in the contest (i.e., Timaeus' speech in the previous dialogue: as is well known, the truncated *Critias* must be read alongside the *Timaeus* as a diptych). Shortly afterwards, Critias himself revives the metaphor, reminding his interlocutors of their responsibility “towards our spectators”:

Socrates | προλέγω γε μήν, ὡς φίλε Κριτία, σοὶ τὴν τοῦ θεάτρου διάνοιαν, ὅτι θαυμαστῶς ὁ πρότερος ηὐδοκίμηκεν ἐν αὐτῷ ποιητῆς, ὡστε τῆς συγγνώμης δεήσει τινός σοι παμπόλλης, εἰ μέλλεις αὐτὰ δυνατός γενέσθαι παραλαβεῖν. [...]

Critias | οἶδ' ὅτι τῷδε τῷ θεάτρῳ δόξομεν τὰ προσήκοντα μετρίως ἀποτετελεκέναι. τοῦτ' οὖν αὕτη ἡδη δραστέον.

(Plato, *Criti.* 108b-d).

On the other hand, in terms of the relevance in the political framework, as the leader of the pro-Lacedaemonian party, it goes without saying that Critias was a prominent figure whose name and actions, including his poetic works, were on everyone's lips and at the forefront of people's minds when attending theatrical performances. In this regard, it is worth recalling the political climate in which *Frogs* was performed in January 405 BCE. Just a few months earlier, the Arginusian trial had taken place; eight months later, the Athenian democratic forces would be defeated at the Battle of Aegospotami, finally bringing the Peloponnesian War to an end. Against the backdrop of these seething events and intense passions, Aristophanes' comedy portrays a period of unrest and epochal uncertainty, marking the end of one era and the bloody and troubled beginning of another: the brief reign of the Thirty Tyrants, followed by Socrates' trial and verdict.

During this turbulent period, when playwrights had to strike a balance between freedom and commitment, Aristophanes staged his successful comedy. Perhaps the absence of direct references to Critias reflects his role in dealing with the enemy, and the *phobos* of the imminent establishment of a pro-Spartan government in opposition to the democratic party in Athens – the fear of a revolution that would sweep away the last remnants of languishing democracy and change Athens forever. So Francesco Donadi: “Nel mezzo di questo magma rovente di accadimenti e di passioni [...] tempi penultimi [...] di epocale incertezza, stanno le Rane” (I take suggestions and quotations from Donadi 1978, 48-77).

Perhaps the comic parody served as an outlet for the playwright's thoughts, which he did not dare express otherwise on the basis of a well-founded premonition of the terror that would soon overwhelm the city.

Aristophanes parodies *Pirithous* without mentioning Critias – perhaps because he could not or would not – but fiercely attacks everything associated with Critias and his political programme: Alcibiades, who was far away and therefore less dangerous than his powerful friend at that time; Theramenes, who was willing to compromise and had initially shared leadership of the Thirty with Critias; and Euripides and Socrates, who were Critias' friends and shared his poetic principles and political theories. Critias, the 'strong man' of the day and rising star of the 405-404 political season in Athens, is not mentioned in the play except through these indirect references – the masks of his friends.

Therefore, the assertion "Non consta che (Crizia) sia stato berteggiato dalla commedia" (Fraccaroli 1910, 269) is not entirely true and accurate. Despite Critias' name being absent from the Aristophanic work closest to the advent of the Thirty, *Frogs* contains numerous allusions (which were probably very clear to contemporaries) to *Pirithous*, which was most probably written by Critias himself, and in that play the Panhellenic hero Heracles saves the Athenian hero Theseus.

IV. Some (very tentative) Conclusions

The Scholiast's reference to a parody of *Theseus*, and not of *Pirithous*, recalls a reference to Theseus as a character in a tragedy. Theseus appeared as a tragic character in both Euripides' *Theseus* and Critias' *Pirithous*, but the latter may have been less well known to the Scholiast, or may have been considered less important in his hierarchy. Moreover, even among ancient exegetes, there was some doubt as to whether Aristophanes had used *Theseus* as the inspiration for his play (see, for example, the scholia on line 465, which acknowledges the similarity but expresses some uncertainty: Chantry 1999, 71; cf. Fritzsche 1845, 207).

I should add that, as far as we know, Euripides' tragedy was not set in Hades. A further argument can be made against a link between *Theseus* and *Frogs*. Euripides' tragedy was performed ante 422 BCE, while *Frogs* was performed in 405 BCE. So Kannicht 2004, 428:

Scaena in Creta sita est [...]. Fabula docta est ante Vespas Aristophanis (F 385 + 386), i.e. ante a. 422.

Comic parody requires the audience to recognise the reference text immediately, as they are necessary accomplices to the metatextual allusions. Although *Frogs* makes allusions to many of Euripides' poetic works, both recent and distant in time, it is highly unlikely, from a dramaturgical point of view, that the comic parody's first reference was linked with a play such as *Theseus*, which had a completely different plot and was performed at least seventeen years earlier.

While the dates for *Pirithous*' composition and performance are completely unknown, Cropp is right to point out that any circular argument should be avoided. Furthermore, Cropp is undoubtedly right to argue that it would be unfounded to try to reconstruct the lost *Pirithous* from the text of *Frogs*. However, there is plenty of evidence linking *Pirithous* to *Frogs*, as well as a series of clues.

If one accepts that my proposed interpretation is plausible, two consequences arise: one concerning the emphasis placed on the comic elements of the play and one concerning the tragic undertones reflected by *Frogs*. *Pirithous'* presence in the subtext of *Frogs* greatly enhances the comedy of the opening scene. Dionysus' club and lion skin do not refer generically to one of Heracles' labours, such as the descent into Hades and the capture of Cerberus, but rather parody Heracles' character in the tragedy *Pirithous*, which the audience may have seen at the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens only a year or two earlier. In this sense, the jokes, allusions and entire scenography of the first part of the play take on an amplified meaning that enhances the comic spirit of Aristophanes' work.

Furthermore, if we agree with the critics who attribute *Pirithous* to Critias rather than Euripides, the link between the work and contemporary political reality is strengthened, as are the references to a powerful figure in Athenian political life at the time: Critias, a poet, philosopher, and political leader who would become one of the protagonists of the anti-democratic coup d'état a few months later. Assuming that the subtext of Critias' tragedy is present, all references to the contemporary political situation become more noticeable, effective and urgent; they are perceived as burning issues. This lends the comedy a dramatic and almost distressing tone, reflecting the heavy political climate and fear hanging over Athens in the months before the Thirty Tyrants seized power.

What I am proposing is a body of circumstantial evidence, rather than concrete proof. Nevertheless, the picture that emerges is both convincing and consistent. In summary: this is not the place to reopen the controversial question of *Pirithous'* authorship. However, if (as Wilamowitz suggests) the parodied author had been the influential Critias (future leader of the Thirty Tyrants), Aristophanes' play would certainly have been much more caustic and effective for a fifth-century audience.

The issue we have discussed here relates both to the forms of metatheatre employed by Aristophanes in ancient theatre, and to contemporary metacritical debate.

Metatheatre – we find that in his comedy, Aristophanes is not staging a parody of a generic episode of Heracles' descent to the Underworld, but rather a metatheatrical parody of specific scenes and situations that the audience had recently witnessed in tragic form on stage. Furthermore, the names of Critias and his poetic and political figure loom large throughout the drama, particularly in the numerous references to the issues that fuelled and heated political life in Athens around 405 BCE.

Metacriticism – rather than producing a vicious circle, the critical debate I have reconstructed has taken the form of a ring. Returning to Wilamowitz's hypothesis has allowed us to confirm the influence of *Pirithous'* plot on the play *Frogs*. It seems essential to understand the plot of *Pirithous* in order to fully appreciate Aristophanes' play. Indeed, bearing in mind *Pirithous'* plot while reading *Frogs* makes the comedy, particularly the opening scene, much funnier and more enjoyable. Rather than considering the opening act as a mere parody of the myth, this

interpretation renders *Frogs* more brilliant and meaningful. At the same time, through this interpretative lens, Aristophanes' comedy appears more imbued with the tragic atmosphere of the *stasis* that shook the polis at the time, when the Thirty Tyrants' *coup d'état* was imminent.

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Abstract

In his commentary on lines 464 ff. of *Frogs*, the Scholiast refers five times to Euripides' *Theseus*, the play said to be parodied in the comedy. Wilamowitz was the most vocal opponent of the validity of this connection. In his initial refutation, published in *Analecta Euripidea* in 1875, he argued that the Scholiast had identified only a verbal similarity between the two texts despite significant differences in theme and chronology. According to Wilamowitz, the real object of parody in *Frogs* was another tragedy: *Pirithous*. Furthermore, in the same essay, Wilamowitz himself strongly argues for attributing authorship of *Pirithous* to Critias, and not to Euripides – a notion that still divides critics. This article summarises the arguments of leading contemporary scholars seeking to confirm or refute Wilamowitz's hypothesis concerning the authorship of the tragedy and the idea that Aristophanes staged a tragic parody of *Pirithous* by Critias. Regarding the metatheatrical dimension of the 5th Century BCE, the paper proposes that the similarities and assonances between *Frogs* and *Pirithous*, acknowledged by critics in the passage from *Frogs* 464 ff. (the encounters between Heracles and Aeacus, and between Dionysus and the guardian of the Underworld), could extend much further than previously recognised, encompassing thematic and dramatic recurrences, textual parody, and references to the political situation at the time. Rather than considering the initial act of *Frogs* as a generic parody of the myth of Heracles' descent into the Underworld, it is concluded that bearing in mind the plot of *Pirithous* and attributing the tragedy to Critias, the reading of *Frogs* becomes much more brilliant and meaningful. At the same time, the comedy appears more imbued with the tragic atmosphere of the *stasis* that shook the polis, when the *coup d'état* of the Thirty Tyrants was imminent.

keywords | Critias' *Pirithous*; Aristophanes' *Frogs*; Metatheatre; Metacriticism.



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