

# *AUSTERITY*

– a long-lost play by Aristophanes –

**The CHARACTERS (in order of first appearance):**

DEMOS (the citizen body of Athens)  
XANTHIAS (slave of Demos)  
AGHYRRIOS (Athenian Politician)  
PROPHET  
CHORUS OF TRAGIC AND COMIC POETS  
MESSENGER  
SPARTAN  
DAUGHTER of Demos  
THEBAN  
HERALD  
CHORUS OF OLIVE TREES  
MONEY  
AUSTERITY

**The location is a street in Athens, just outside the house of DEMOS.**

NOTE: *AUSTERITY* reflects the hard times in which it was written by being less costly to stage than any of Aristophanes' other works. It requires no more than three speaking actors, there are no mute parts at all and both choruses use the same personnel.

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## **BACKSTORY**

Athens is bankrupt following the Peloponnesian War. Not only did the war itself result in huge losses, but the Thirty Tyrants who grabbed power at its end borrowed very large amounts from Sparta and Thebes (both of which had successfully enriched themselves through the long conflict) in order to establish a new rich class and so consolidate an oligarchy aligned with Sparta. But the Thirty were soon overthrown and democracy restored. With this, the Spartans realized that a long-term oligarchy in Athens was unlikely, except by direct subjugation (which would be costly), so they tried to find a way to get their loans back from the democracy. The problem, however, was that the money was no longer there. An ingenious solution was suggested by the Thebans; more money would be lent to Athens so that the Athenians could at least keep paying interest on the initial debt while the city recovered. The Spartans agreed to this bailout plan on the condition that it had some tough strings attached; in particular, Athens would be obliged to make its economy more ‘competitive’ – in other words, it would have to learn some *Spartan discipline*.

*DEMOS and his slave XANTHIAS enter.*

DEMOS: Do not say *anything*, Xanthias! Remember your place.

XANTHIAS: What would *I* say, master?

DEMOS: Do not say 'It's your own fault'.

XANTHIAS: No. What else?

DEMOS: Do not say 'You've got nobody to blame but yourself'.

XANTHIAS: No.... Can I at least call you an imbecile?

DEMOS: Certainly not.

XANTHIAS: Then I shall keep my opinion to myself.

DEMOS: Oh, no, oh, no. I know your way of keeping your opinion to yourself. Good honest oratory is no match for your tight-lipped way of demanding the death sentence.

XANTHIAS: Frankly, I would have settled for public humiliation, but then I realized it's impossible to make you more of a laughing stock than you've managed to make yourself.

DEMOS: But what else could I have done?

XANTHIAS: Can't you sing any other tune? Swap places with me, a slave, then you'll know what Necessity is.

DEMOS: I tell you I didn't have any other choice!

XANTHIAS: Just like the last time?

DEMOS: Yes.

XANTHIAS: And the time before that?

DEMOS: Yes.

XANTHIAS: And the ti....

DEMOS: Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes!

XANTHIAS: (*counts on fingers*) You forgot one.

DEMOS: (*in utter despair*) Yes.... What are we to do? If this was a comedy by Aristophanes, there'd be a character, a rustic, probably, or an artisan, just some ordinary guy, could even be a gal, with a completely crazy idea about how to change the world and... it would work! Not actually *in* the world. But that's because you Athenians never listen. You only hear. You only hear what *you*

would have meant if *you'd* been the one saying what you don't bother to listen to because it's not you saying it. But even Aristophanes can't come up with a crack-brainedly impractical, wackily simplistic solution to my problem! Hence I too am flummoxed and befuddled. If he'd ever *had* hair, he now wouldn't have. Oh, what is he to do, what is he to do? I mean, what am I to do, what am I to do? You know, I have the funniest feeling that this comedy isn't actually written yet so we've got to make it up as we go along. Is this senility, I ask myself? Am I rambling as though I've forgotten what it was I wanted to eat? I mean say. I am old, true, true. But incontinent? I, Demos [the citizen body of Athens], I was old twenty-three years ago. But never open-arsed. Ah, yes, I remember it well, how the tanner Kleon was well and truly buggered by the sausage seller.<sup>1</sup> As if it was yesterday. But as for what I was talking about when I launched the ship of this speech, not long ago, I admit to having been blown off course and, quite possibly, ship-wrecked.... Xanthias?

XANTHIAS: (*to audience*) I'll take him through it gently. (*To DEMOS*) First turn your eye to this ethereal expanse.<sup>2</sup>

DEMOS: (*looks up*) There. But why do you ask me to look aloft?

XANTHIAS: Is it as it was or has it changed?

DEMOS: It is somehow shinier than before, more clear.

XANTHIAS: And is your heart still all a pitter-pat?

DEMOS: Why, of a truth, 'tis steadied now, and firm. What does this mean?

XANTHIAS: Now look at what you're holding in your hand.

DEMOS: (*looks*) Ah. (*Looks away*)

XANTHIAS: Yes. "Ah." What is it? Come on, come on. Look again.

DEMOS: (*after a pause*) Nothing.

XANTHIAS: Exactly! You've come home *empty-handed*!

DEMOS: But what choice did I have? The alternative would have been *much worse*!

*Enter AGHYRRIOS*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Demos ('the People') was a character in Aristophanes' *Knights*, performed in 424 BCE. In that play, the demagogue Kleon (the tanner) is out-witted and out-manoeuvred by the even more scurrilous sausage seller. By implication of the 'twenty-three year' gap, the date of the present play is 401.

<sup>2</sup> This and the next few lines parody *Bacchae* 1264-84, first staged in Athens only a few years before the date of this play.

<sup>3</sup> Athenian politician who, after the fall of the Thirty Tyrants, first introduced a payment of one obol for attendance at the Assembly.

AGHYRRIOS: Demos, Demos, last year you supported me, last year you saw clearly the wisdom of my proposal. And rightly so, for has it not been the greatest success? Attendance at the Assembly has risen from Kleon, Kleonymos, Hyperbolos,<sup>4</sup> and a pigeon-shit encrusted statue of Kleisthenes<sup>5</sup> to thousands – thousands, true, of those that some would call the rabble and the riff-raff, but you and I know well that the great ship of our democracy needs oarsmen. Especially now we have no fleet. The more rowers our democracy has, the faster it can go. True, the point is not, in fact, to go fast. The point is to go in the right direction. However, I adopted the metaphor of oarsmen, rather than of those who steer, because they are considerably more numerous and from the poorer classes. I'm sure you understand what I mean.

DEMOS: Yes, Aghyrrios. And I still support you, believe me.

AGHYRRIOS: Then why on earth did you just vote as you did?

XANTHIAS: Because the alternative would have been much worse – he'll explain.

AGHYRRIOS: But ordinary workers can't afford to take time off for things like debate and decision making. That's why I proposed the basic attendance payment: one obol a day. Now you've taken it away!

XANTHIAS: Not exactly – he'll say, slippery as a sardine.

AGHYRRIOS: Not exactly?

XANTHIAS: He'll tell you they're still being paid.

AGHYRRIOS: Oh, yes? And how much – *exactly* – is this new tax on free speech that you've just voted in?

XANTHIAS: One –

AGHYRRIOS: No. Let him speak for himself. Slaves are useful but they still don't go for a crap for you.

DEMOS: One obol per day.

AGHYRRIOS: Shit-wise you've only just begun, Demos. Come on, squeeze away, there's a lot of hot, steamy air to expel too.

DEMOS: I assume you're asking for my reasoning.

AGHYRRIOS: Reasoning! You'll have to out-Socratize Socrates!

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<sup>4</sup> Three demagogues of the 420s (all referred to insultingly in Aristophanes' early extant plays).

<sup>5</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup> century champion of Athenian democracy, not the contemporary commonly mocked by Aristophanes for effeminacy.

DEMOS: Well, as you know, many new taxes have recently been introduced – on symposia, on philosophy, on mourning at funerals, on freedom as purchasable by slaves, on wood for burning gathered from the forest – and so on and so on – not to mention all the cuts to civic festivals – all with the intention of increasing state revenues – but – and here’s the rub – every measure adopted so far has led to a *decrease* in revenues. Why? Because now people hold fewer symposia, they spout less philosophy (in spite of greatly increased unemployment), they stay cold, they bury their relatives in silence – not to mention the loss of sales tax since the agora’s half deserted these days – in a word, in the light of all these factors, I was persuaded by the argument of Archinos<sup>6</sup> that if the State continues to pay people one obol per day for attending the Assembly, but then taxes them one obol per day for the very same thing, logically this cannot lead to any further *reduction* in revenues and thus, you see, it halts the slide.... On top of which, “the alternative would be much worse”.

AGHYRRIOS: But don’t you understand, this is to let the wolf in sheep’s clothing into the hen-house? It’s to feed the boil of tyranny by sweeping its true name under the carpet merely called the Many! At the next Assembly I shall propose an increase in the attendance pay to two obols. You must support me.

DEMOS: Er...

AGHYRRIOS: I don’t like the sound of that.

DEMOS: I didn’t say anything.

AGHYRRIOS: I didn’t like the sound of what you were thinking. Out with it, nonetheless.

DEMOS: It’s like this, Aghyrios. I won’t be attending the next Assembly.

AGHYRRIOS: But why on earth not, man?

DEMOS: I can’t afford to. Yes, you may well look at me in horror. For decades, I – the Sovereign Demos – I was not in need of payment to attend the Assembly, to speak my mind and cast my vote. But now I am. All my wealth is gone. Five hundred triremes invested in the bottom of the sea. Oh, War, War, in victory you are a honey-tongued courtesan enjoyed in every orifice for one sweet night, but in defeat you are a nagging wife year after bitter year! What client states are

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<sup>6</sup> Moderate democratic leader who supplanted the more radical Thrasyboulos (who was largely responsible for overthrowing the Thirty Tyrants and thus restoring democracy in Athens).

subject now to Athens? None. What puppets bring their ‘with this money I kiss your arse’ tribute? Net result: I am broke, penniless, without the wherewithal.

AGHYRRIOS: But *you* just voted for the new tax on free speech.

DEMOS: Because Athenians must become more competitive. When that happens, I’ll vote to repeal it.

AGHYRRIOS: How? You said you can’t afford to attend the Assembly any more.

DEMOS: But that’s the whole point. When Athens becomes more competitive, I will be able to.

XANTHIAS: I smell smoke and funny fumes.

AGHYRRIOS: No, when the Pythia speaks it has the ring of sense dressed up as nonsense. This, I’d say, is the reverse.

XANTHIAS: When the lark will breakfast on a turning worm at midnight and the moon forgets to pay the sandal-maker because it drank unwatered wine, then shall Athens take its feet in its hands and get... what precise kind of proper bugging?

AGHYRRIOS: Demos, what exactly do you mean by “more competitive”?

XANTHIAS: That’s what I just asked.

DEMOS: Oh, you know, a longer working day, fewer festivals, lower pay, reduced rations for slaves, abolition of wasteful spending such as disability pensions<sup>7</sup> (which, by the way, also has the advantage that people stop chopping off their own hands and legs), no more warm water in the public baths, that sort of thing.

AGHYRRIOS: All of which we have already enacted. With what result? Collapse! No one buys, no one sells, no one works! The price of slaves has dropped through the floor but no one buys them because no one has a use for them. All the artisans, the Metics, have packed up and gone back to Phoenicia or Egypt because they can’t sell their goods. Pray Zeus we don’t soon need swords and spears, for who is to make them? And take the new tax on olive groves. One drachma per tree. One drachma per *tree*!! Now every farmer wants to get shot of his land if it’s got any olive trees on it – he can’t chop them down on pain of death<sup>8</sup> – but no Athenian wants to take it on and the foreigners are sitting tight and waiting till the price hits the bottom. Then we Athenians will have to import

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<sup>7</sup> See Aristotle *Athenian Constitution* 49.4

<sup>8</sup> This measure had been enacted by Solon a century before.

our main export, olive oil! And how on earth will we choose then between our daily bread and athletes with beautiful shiny bodies?<sup>9</sup>

DEMOS: ‘Is there no way,’ I oft have asked myself, ‘of escaping Charybdis, and at the same time keeping Scylla off when she is trying to harm my men?’<sup>10</sup>

AGHYRRIOS: Yes, but the goddess told Odysseus to steer as close as he could to the man-eating rock, so as to lose only six men, not to sail straight into the whirlpool and lose the lot, like you’re doing. And another thing, Demos, has it not occurred to you that what you’re calling ‘increased competitiveness’ is just another name for *Spartan discipline*?

*Shocked silence*

AGHYRRIOS: You mean, it *hadn’t* occurred to you?

*Silence still*

AGHYRRIOS: Xanthias, can you speak for him?

XANTHIAS: Look, the truth is, I enjoy being a slave in Athens. I mean, if I have to be a slave, I’d rather be it in Athens than anywhere else. Here, only your own master can beat you. No one else can beat you, not even if you don’t step into the gutter to let them pass, because they can’t ultimately be sure that you are a slave, because, in Athens, everybody dresses terribly. Now there’s a logic to this. When we were a naval power dependent upon wealth from our subject states, we had to be slaves to our slaves, in order that we could get in our slave-rents from our tributaries, and let the real slave go – or at least act – free.<sup>11</sup> You see, I even use ‘we’ impertinently.

AGHYRRIOS: Could it be, perhaps, that you are expecting a beating?

XANTHIAS: Yes.

AGHYRRIOS: From me?

XANTHIAS: Yes.

AGHYRRIOS: Xanthias, why on earth didn’t you point the obvious out to him? First the Spartans defeat us in the long war. Then they and other states lend vast sums of money to the Thirty Tyrants – money they, the Spartans in particular, have

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<sup>9</sup> Athens’ main export was olive oil but the city imported most of its grain. Aghyrrios implies that Athens will not be able to afford both if both have to be imported. Among the many uses of olive oil was oiling the bodies of athletes.

<sup>10</sup> *Odyssey* 12, trans Butler.

<sup>11</sup> See Xenophon’s *The Polity of the Athenians* for this very argument.



looted from other states, but which they still consider *theirs*.<sup>12</sup> Then the Thirty Tyrants are overthrown, democracy is restored, and the Spartans and the others want their money back but, naturally, it's nowhere to be found. Then, when the Spartans are about to impose direct rule on us, the Thebans suggest a crazy plan – which obviously the dumb, financially stuck-in-the-mud Spartans could never have thought of – to lend us *more* money so we can keep paying the *interest* on the first loans – to which the Spartans agree but ONLY if we adopt certain measures to make Athens *more competitive*. And *you* see that Demos does *not* see that the object of this is to turn Athens into Sparta by the imposition of *Spartan discipline*. And yet YOU DO NOT TELL HIM!!! **WHY????** And look at him now. I thought it was only Socrates who could stand frozen in mid step from morning till night, thinking.

XANTHIAS: Let's move him.

AGHYRRIOS: Move him?

XANTHIAS: Yes. Pick him up and put him down somewhere else. Then he might see things from another point of view.

AGHYRRIOS: Good idea.

*They pick up and move DEMOS, who remains frozen in his pose until they put him down again when he comes to life.*

DEMOS: What a fool I've been, what a fool I've been! How could I have been so stupid! (*He starts beating XANTHIAS*) Take that, you idiot, and that! How could I not have seen what was so obvious? How could I not have seen what was underneath my nose and also smelt so rotten? Like Ajax when the crafty goddess confused and veiled his sight so that he slaughtered only cows and sheep, thinking them to be the Greek commanders,<sup>13</sup> I am too ashamed to remain in this all-seeing, all-exposing light of day. So take that, Xanthias, you dog, you rascal, you superfluous finger in the pie! Why on earth didn't you tell me?

XANTHIAS: Well, if I had pointed the obvious out to you, it could only have been *after* you'd failed to see it for yourself. Right? And that would've made you feel

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<sup>12</sup> Spartan citizens were not supposed to have money and there was no exchangeable Spartan currency. Nonetheless manufacturer and trade existed, carried out by the *Perioikoi*, and probably the currencies of other states were used as valid tender, whether obtained through exports or through looting.

<sup>13</sup> The subject of Sophocles' play *Ajax*. The 'crafty goddess' is Athena.

humiliated. A bit like Ajax – so I thought. And then, in order to avoid having to fall on your sword, you’d have beaten me instead – so I surmised. I might have been wrong, of course.

DEMOS: Well, yes, never mind that now. So they want to turn Athens into Sparta, do they? Going barefoot, eating only bread and beans, mixing one part wine to nine parts water, keeping long silences then uttering only monosyllables, spending long hours in the gym cultivating a complete absence of imagination, and worst of all, it’s absolutely compulsory that a Spartan trusts every other Spartan! Impossible!

AGHYRRIOS: That’s better. Now, Demos, I’m off to the Tholos to inform the Prytaneis<sup>14</sup> that I intend to put a motion to raise the pay for attending the Assembly. You MUST support it.

DEMOS: You’ll have to lend me an obol.<sup>15</sup>

AGHYRRIOS: I’m afraid I can’t afford to.

*AGHYRRIOS goes.*

DEMOS: Xanthias?

XANTHIAS: I’m a slave.

DEMOS: Come on, come on, I know you’ve been saving up to buy your freedom.

XANTHIAS: All right, then. I’ll buy my freedom now.

DEMOS: You mean you’ve saved enough already?!

XANTHIAS: For one obol.

DEMOS: But this is blackmail!

XANTHIAS: Yes.

DEMOS: But think, Xanthias. If you’re a free man, you’ll have to pay for your own food. As my slave, I’m obliged to feed you – even if it is only bran and barley cakes, with wild greens and any snails we can catch.

XANTHIAS: That’s true. But can I at least buy my freedom from now until supper time for one obol?

DEMOS: Yes, I suppose so.

*XANTHIAS goes.*

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<sup>14</sup> This could be rendered “I’m off to inform the Senate Standing Committee...”

<sup>15</sup> Has Demos forgotten that he’d be paid an obol for attending, albeit one immediately taxed back? Or is he among those who now cannot afford to take time off work? But does he work? Aristophanes leaves all this unclear.

DEMOS: (*alone*) What is to be done, what is to be done? – that is the question. When we sacrifice an ox to the gods, we don't just kill it – we roast it and we eat it, while the gods themselves are satisfied with the juicy smell of fat on flame and a slice of liver. But now my eyes are opened I see that all this sacrifice to the Boeotians and Laconians is simply... sacrifice to the Boeotians and Laconians! I have invited everyone to a feast and barred the door to myself! I have kicked myself out of my own door and down my own steps because I can no longer afford even to be a vagabond in my own house! I have... I have... a plague of figurative speech – yes – and no idea what to do next... But who's this coming? Someone with a mantic disposition, by the look of all his tics and twitches, the bag of entrails and the feathers<sup>16</sup> – not to mention the big third eye painted on his forehead. I'd call that overstatement.

*Enter PROPHET*

PROPHET: Alas, how terrible it is to know, when there's no money to be made from knowing.<sup>17</sup>

DEMOS: What'd be the point in handing over my last drachma to you, Prophet?  
Everyone can see the future these days. It's a black bog full of black vipers on a moonless night.

PROPHET: Ah! But those birds overhead – *where* are they flying to?

DEMOS: Birds? I see no birds.

PROPHET: So *why* were they flying there so quickly?

DEMOS: What species were they?

PROPHET: Sparrows as big as crows and crows as big as eagles.

DEMOS: How've they been eating so well? Do they know something I don't?

PROPHET: They do, they do! Oh, woe, woe, Demos! Those birds whizzed by at such a speed that any lucky dropping they might have shat on us would've hit Megara instead. It is an evil portent.

DEMOS: Have you ever thought of changing your business plan? People might pay you if you sometimes hinted you had good news.

PROPHET: Yet see that swallow!

DEMOS: That's impossible. We're playing at the Lenaia [the winter festival].

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<sup>16</sup> Divination could involve examining the entrails of sacrificed animals or the behaviour of birds.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Tiresias's first words in *Oedipus*.

PROPHET: True, one swallow doesn't make a summer. But it's a start. It means there's light at the end of one of the roads where three roads meet.

DEMOS: I don't suppose there's a sign which says, this way for the light, this way for father-slaying and mother-humping, and this way for a mystery tour? Hey, could you be the Theban prophet?<sup>18</sup>

PROPHET: Oh, no. No. I'm from Thespiai.<sup>19</sup> With me as your guide to the future, you can't go wrong – well, you can't go wronger than you are going.

DEMOS: Ok, Ok, I'll pay. (*To audience*) I know what you're thinking: The rogue! He actually had a last drachma but borrowed a mere obol from his own slave, claiming he had nothing at all! How unprincipled! But this *could be* money better spent, you see. I have a funny feeling that, if I support Aghyrrios so the pay for attending the Assembly becomes two obols, I might then be persuaded – by the argument that “the alternative would be much worse” – to raise the tax on free speech to two obols too. But only once I'd forgotten what “increasing competitiveness” really means, of course. I'm not stupid!

*DEMOS pays the PROPHET, sadly handing over his last drachma. The PROPHET goes into some kind of painful trance.*

PROPHET: Aaaaae... O O O O O... Ba Ba Ba... Oh, Apollo, what are you saying?... Eeeeeaaggh.... Rrrrrrr... Your sister's getting *really* feisty? ... Huhuhuhuhu... Like a swarm of wild bees!... Yarrooooahah ha... Not even by jumping in a lake?... Owowowow... his arse from his elbow? I seriously doubt it ... Blurrup, blurrup, ya!!...The day of reckoning is here... Aiaiaiaiooo... Can't you hurry up? This hurts... Umph umph O O O... Yes, yes, I'll tell him.

DEMOS: What is it? What is it?

PROPHET: O Demos, most miserable of men, you have greatly vexed the virgin goddess.

DEMOS: What, Athena the Spoiler<sup>20</sup>?

PROPHET: No, Artemis the Undepilated.

DEMOS: But what have I done?

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<sup>18</sup> Tiresias, who appears in the play *Oedipus* in which the reference to three roads meeting is made.

<sup>19</sup> A small town near Thebes.

<sup>20</sup> The forms a pun in English; Athena was known, among various other things, as Ἄ suggesting plundering or despoiling (cf. her status as a warrior goddess), while ‘spoiler’ also hints at her status as Parthenos or virgin.

PROPHET: It's more what you've not done. You haven't made any sacrifices to her, although of late you've been sacrificing nearly everything you have.

DEMOS: But I've *not* been sacrificing nearly everything I have to the other gods either. Not even to Aphrodite. I've been sacrificing it to...

PROPHET: Shhh, man! This is bad enough as it is. Do you want all the other divinities to notice how stupid you've been? Artemis the Unmountable, who delights in all the young suckling things that replenish the forest groves, she's adamant that you've been sacrificing beyond your means and now you've got to pay for it.

DEMOS: How? All our oxen, sheep and goats have been put in a special account to be used only for payment of interest on our debts. Would the goddess be content with an old broiler hen?

PROPHET: You must sacrifice your virgin daughter to her.

DEMOS: But... but...

PROPHET: All right, we'll accept the youngest in lieu.

DEMOS: I meant "but I..."

PROPHET: "But I don't want to"?

DEMOS: Yes.

PROPHET: Of course you don't want to – or it wouldn't be a sacrifice!

DEMOS: But when the Huntress demanded the sacrifice of Iphigenia, it was because Agamemnon had shot and killed a pregnant deer, one of the goddess's own. I haven't done anything like that.

PROPHET: Oh, no? How many Athenian would-be businesses have been still-born because of all the new taxes you've voted through the Assembly?

DEMOS: But what's that got to do with the forests and the trackless stony places, the uninhabited haunts of the glorious knee-displaying goddess?<sup>21</sup> If I'm destroying something, it's the basis of civilization – not her wild domain.

PROPHET: Haven't you recently offered her shrine at Braurona to private investors? Artemis hates the contamination of money almost as much as she hates male liquidity.

DEMOS: But I had no –

PROPHET: And look at it another way. You'll have one less mouth to feed.

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<sup>21</sup> Artemis is commonly depicted wearing a short chiton so she could run freely in the hunt.

DEMOS: True, true, I hadn't thought of that – and I suppose it might work. Now go – or at least keep still – I can't think this through with you twitching around and convulsing all over the place like Io on the way to Memphis.<sup>22</sup> Besides, I've paid you my last drachma, you can't expect the cloak off my back.

*Exit PROPHET*

DEMOS: But how will I get my daughter here, without her mother suspecting anything? I can't use Euripides' trick. She'll never believe I've arranged the girl's marriage, even if it's to a fifty year-old whose only military prowess is controlling the theatre audience with his rod, which won't even stand upright<sup>23</sup> – she knows I couldn't possibly afford the wedding feast. How, then? How?

*DEMOS goes into deep thinking mode, pacing up and down. After a few moments, he absent-mindedly paces off.*

*Enter CHORUS of COMIC AND TRAGIC POETS.*

CHORUS: Where is the foolish one, he who thinks too much and too little, both at the same time, but never does anything right, so that he can justly be described as his own worst enemy? Where is the one who causes all and sundry not to know whether to laugh or to cry? Where is he for whom – as for all of us, at least according to half of us – it would have been better not to have been born, or at least to have died in infancy, or perhaps right after that first fuck? Where is he who has proved, too well – according to the other half of us – that there's no fool like a fool who is not foolish enough when the time cries out for folly? To hunt down this man we have joined our mighty forces, we, the teachers of diverse choruses, we have united as a chorus ourselves, although normally we only talk to each other at dinner parties.

HALF-CHORUS OF TRAGIC POETS: Hail, holy light<sup>24</sup>

Light we know we should have greeted

Hours ago, but we failed to rise from our beds on time

Our misery weighs so heavy on our heads

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<sup>22</sup> Io, a priestess of Hera, was pursued by Zeus. Either Zeus himself, for his convenience, or Hera, out of jealousy, turned her into a cow. Hera then sent a gadfly to torment and madden Io, causing her to wander the extent of the known world. In Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, the chorus of Io's descendants reveals (l. 311) that she finally arrived in the ancient capital of Egypt, Memphis.

<sup>23</sup> Agamemnon lied that Iphigenia was to marry the great (and youthful) warrior Achilles. Rod-bearers were employed to keep discipline in the theatre audience. There is also an allusion to the flaccid comic phallus.

<sup>24</sup> Electra's first words in Sophocles' *Electra*.

It's so terribly hard to face another blast  
Of your all-seeing radiance –  
Yet tell us, tell us, where, where  
Is Demos, the wretched one?

HALF-CHORUS OF COMIC POETS: We have a better idea  
Let's ask these people sitting here.  
The half of them who're not yet drunk  
Must've noticed Demos do a bunk,  
Hence they probably have a clue  
Where he's scarpered off to.

HALF-CHORUS OF TRAGIC POETS: Then, when we find him, he will learn:  
Let no man think himself happy  
Till he reaches the end of his life without mishap.

HALF-CHORUS OF COMIC POETS: And we will teach him this:  
If happiness is like a kiss,  
The tragic message (just the gist)  
Amounts to "kiss my fist"!  
But here he comes!

*DEMOS paces back on, still deep in thought.*

CHORUS: Demos, you rogue, you miscreant, you traitor, you simpleton, you sap, you  
cuckoo, you dotard, you dullard, you dickhead, you numbskull, you pair of ears  
with what nature abhors in between, do you know what you have done?

DEMOS: Invented the thesaurus?

CHORUS: You have made us, the comic poets and the tragic poets, form a union!  
That's either the very definition of absurd incongruity or a portent of the end of  
the world, take your pick. And why? Why? First of all, to give you a good  
thrashing. Then we intend to fight for our common interests, because unity is  
strength – right, boys?

DEMOS: But what has happened?

CHORUS: Since you voted for a tax on free speech, only the rich can afford to attend  
the Assembly. Being rich, their first goal is to stay rich, because if they don't  
*stay rich* they won't be able to *get richer* – which is the second goal of being  
rich – *IF* we ever get out of this mess. So, naturally, they are undermining and  
sabotaging all the liturgies [including paying for play productions], and as a

major step in this barbarous plan, they have just voted with Kinesias *to halve the size of the chorus!*<sup>25</sup> And it's all your fault!

*The CHORUS advances menacingly on DEMOS.*

DEMOS: Wait, wait, friends! Haven't I always been on your side? I'm at every tragedy and every comedy. I weep and I laugh and I boo and hiss the baddies and I shout encouragement and advice to the goodies and, true, I belch in some serious speeches if I want a different playwright to win, and I shout racist abuse at barbarian characters, and, yes, occasionally I get into a fight with neighbouring hooligans, I mean spectators, but it's all in good Dionysiac fun. In fact, I'd say I'm your ideal theatre-goer.

CHORUS: Tragedians and Comedians unite – to give this wretch a good drubbing! Forward!

DEMOS: Wait! I have important news! With five fewer teeth, lips swollen like country sausages, and – I fear from the wild look of you – my whole head rammed up my arse, I won't be able to tell you what it is. Not clearly, anyway.

CHORUS: This but delays –it deflects not – our justice.<sup>26</sup>

DEMOS: I admit that it was my vote that led, indirectly, to this... *sparagmos*, this dismemberment of our choruses and our festivals. As soon as I had cast it, I realized the error of my ways. But fear not, for now I am taking the necessary steps to set all aright. Soon you will see with your own eyes how I shall set Athens free from these doldrums where nothing stirs, no money changes hands, no contracts are signed, no entrepreneurial vision gets even onto the drawing board, for the drawing board itself has been chopped up to use as firewood because there's no tax on using office furniture for fuel yet, and where even the

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<sup>25</sup> Liturgies were civic duties required of rich citizens. A rich man who financed all aspects of the production of a comedy or a tragic tetralogy, apart from the actors who were paid for by the state, was known as a *choregos*, that is, one who leads a chorus. This duty was costly and at times restricted. Apparently, through much of the Peloponnesian War the number of comedies presented at the City Dionysia was reduced from five to three. The scholiast commenting on *Frogs* l. 404 says that Aristophanes "seems to imply that the *choregiai* were carried out at low cost for the poets. At any rate Aristotle says that in the archonship of this Callias [405BCE] it seems there were two *choregoi* [i.e. the duty was shared] for both the tragedies and the comedies at the Dionysia; so that perhaps there was some cost-cutting around the Lenaea [where *Frogs* was performed]. A little later Cinesias cut off the *choregos*-support entirely, which is why Strattis wrote in the play about him 'This is the tent of Cinesias the chorus-killer.'" Commenting on *Frogs* 153, the scholiast says "Cinesias worked against the comic writers, so that they would be without *choregoi*". (Rusten 105)

<sup>26</sup> Where, as here, the diction is obviously 'tragic,' the line should be given to a tragedian in the chorus – and where it is 'comic,' to a comedian.



mice are reluctant to breed because the scraps from our tables stay on our tables, now our own full meals. But soon a fresh, fair wind will blow, and this, our ship of state, our city, will sail into a rich and glorious future. And how – I hear you ask – will Demos achieve this after doing everything wrong five times already? I say, Can he not learn from his mistake of not having learnt from his mistakes? He can, and he has. Friends, poets, teachers of wisdom, celebrate in your works to come the wisdom of Demos who, Agamemnon-aping, on this day has decided to sacrifice his own beloved daughter, another Iphigenia, to Artemis, and thus save Athens.

HALF-CHORUS OF TRAGIC POETS: Nobly you play your part, Demos.

The austere goddess is to blame.<sup>27</sup>

HALF-CHORUS OF COMIC POETS: Demos, you've fucked up twenty times.

This plan's even worse of the same.

TRAGIC POETS: Glory for the girl who, virgin still (we hope),  
Weds death, that thus-wise Athens pays its debts.

COMIC POETS: But does she know what's being cooked?  
If I were her, I'd bugger off – with no regrets.

TRAGIC POETS: O Uncertainty of mortal life! For as brief candles  
We know not when, or whence, the wind that snuffs us comes.

COMIC POETS: Maybe not, but we can take precautions; avoiding,  
For example, being gassed by farts from bums.

TRAGIC POETS: The Huntress with her hounds can get quite testy,  
'Tis sound theology that we placate her.

COMIC POETS: "We"? Well, that's a funny use of pronouns;  
It references a little girl who'll never be a mater.

TRAGIC POETS: I'm telling you that Demos' plan is sound –  
Looked at another way, it's an investment too.

COMIC POETS: You fatalists! You haven't even had a glimpse,  
Yet you're shit-scared she'll have the balls off you!

TRAGIC POETS: He who saw the goddess naked, got what he deserved.<sup>28</sup>  
Justice rules the cosmos. Hence I have naught to fear.

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Iphigenia in Aulis* 1402-3

<sup>28</sup> Artemis caused Actaion's own hunting hounds to tear him to pieces. In some versions of the story this was because he had glimpsed her bathing, naked, in a stream.

COMIC POETS: This Union is getting strained. The plan is dumb, insane.  
A life to pay for sweet fuck all – that’s far too dear.

TRAGIC POETS: Debate and gutter talk don’t mix. Therefore  
I’ve half a mind to cuff your ear or kick your derriere.

COMIC POETS: Come on then, wise guys, hurl your weighty maxims at us!  
Comrades, let’s launch our fierce invective through the air!

*The two HALF-CHORUSES fight.*

DEMOS: Poets! Poets! This could be the biggest tragedy since the eagle dropped a  
tortoise on Aeschylus’ bald pate or since Eupolis<sup>29</sup> choked on one of  
Aristophanes’ jokes. Order! Order!

*Enter a MESSENGER.*

MESSENGER: Athenians, stop! Desist! Cease, if only for a moment, our usual  
practices of blocking each other’s path, tripping each other up and stabbing each  
other in the back! A great wonder has occurred, far more truly gob-smacking  
than your flailing fists. Pallas herself has given us a sign!

DEMOS: But what has happened?

MESSENGER: Why, Phidias’ great statue of Athena in the Parthenon, that’s well  
designed to make a man feel small and inadequate,<sup>30</sup> it has transformed itself!

TRAGIC POETS: Has the goddess picked up her shield in readiness? Are we at war  
again against the Mede<sup>31</sup>?

COMIC POETS: Or is she scratching her head, trying to work out why Athenians  
keep ignoring her gift of wisdom<sup>32</sup>?

MESSENGER: It’s worse than either. It’s clear that she who gave us first the olive  
tree,<sup>33</sup> then loads of plunder, the very patroness of civic life, has no more faith  
in us. All the forty talents weight of gold adorning her statue has gone!

DEMOS: Someone’s been helping himself.

MESSENGER: Impossible. Apart from the need for huge amounts of scaffolding and  
twenty wagons to remove it, hardly to be done on the sly, why would they have  
bothered replacing all the gold with lead? No, Athena herself has done this.

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<sup>29</sup> One of the three most highly regarded comic dramatists of the late 5<sup>th</sup> century, along with Kratinos and Aristophanes himself.

<sup>30</sup> It was twelve metres high.

<sup>31</sup> The Persians. In the statue, the goddess’s shield was at her side on the floor.

<sup>32</sup> Athena was goddess of (practical) wisdom and supposedly endowed Athenians with it.

<sup>33</sup> Athena became patroness of Athens after giving it the gift of the olive tree. See also note 45.

DEMOS: But why?

MESSENGER: She must have remembered what Pericles said, right at the start of the long war. If all the temple coffers were depleted, then, in a really-really dire emergency, Athens could use the gold off the statue, but only on condition that it was all put back.<sup>34</sup>

DEMOS: This is a really-really dire emergency.

MESSENGER: But the goddess of foresight obviously doesn't trust us to replace her gold. Hence this miracle.

DEMOS: Truly it is a great wonder when all you can say is, 'No wonder'! Go, bearer of strange tidings, spread your remarkable news far and wide.

*Exit MESSENGER*

CHORUS: Truly gods are gods, for when a mortal asks  
Who will take the laurel crown at the next Olympiad  
In the Pentathlon  
Because he wants to place a bet  
After first checking that the odds are favourable  
He sees no further than tomorrow morning  
When he has to plough his field once again or load his wagon  
With wares for the market or take up his hammer  
To beat more bronze  
For to be mortal is to repeat yourself  
Day after day after day  
Especially if you have to earn a living  
Which is not a very god-like thing to do  
But even those among us who have learned  
(Sometimes painfully)  
To expect the unexpected  
We would not have bet on this!

DEMOS: Oh, no. It's another inspection. Here comes a Spartan with an abacus.

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<sup>34</sup> Normally, much of the city's wealth was stored in temples and sanctuaries. According to Thucydides (2.13), Pericles "said that, if they were ever really reduced to absolute extremities, they could even use the gold on the statue of Athene herself. There was, he informed them, a weight of forty talents of pure gold on this statue, all of which was removable. But he pointed out that if they did use this gold for their own preservation they must restore it again afterwards in the same or in greater quantity." (Trans. Warner)

*Enter a SPARTAN.*

SPARTAN: Demos, have you made that list we asked for of all those who, during the course of the war, so selfishly buried large stores of silver coins in the earth?

DEMOS: We did ask every citizen if they'd done such a heinous thing. They all said: 'Me? No. Of course not.'

SPARTAN: Then we shall have to start digging.

DEMOS: Where?

SPARTAN: Attica.

DEMOS: All of it? In any case, even if it was a sensible – I mean a selfish – thing to do, isn't it their own money?

SPARTAN: Of course it is. We Spartans are reasonable, fair-minded men.

DEMOS: So why the digging?

SPARTAN: Because they didn't pay tax on their buried hoards.

DEMOS: What tax?

SPARTAN: The tax your Extraordinary Assembly<sup>35</sup> will vote through tomorrow.

DEMOS: But if anyone did bury their money, they must have done so years ago.

SPARTAN: I'm sorry?

DEMOS: I said, if anyone did bury their money, they must –

SPARTAN: I heard what you said. I just didn't understand the logic.

DEMOS: Time is customarily divided into past, present and future. Just as the present tends, rather uniformly, to come before the future, the past has a habit of coming *before* the present.... No? If you put the cart before the horse, you'll get to market in the morning to find it just closing for business.... What I'm trying to say is, Athens has a law which says we can't make retrospective laws.

SPARTAN: You weren't in the Extra-Extraordinary Assembly today, were you?

DEMOS: No.... I see.... But that must be unconstitutional!

SPARTAN: Not a bit. The law passed today which says you *can* make retrospective laws isn't itself a retrospective law, so you'll not be able to sentence your own grandfather to death before he's even become a father. In any case, you really do have to find new sources of revenue. (*He plays with his abacus*) Our figures show that you now owe us three times what you did when you first found you couldn't pay us what you owed us, because we've had to lend you another – let

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<sup>35</sup> Normally there were four assemblies in each *prytany*, or tenth of a year. But special, extraordinary or (literally) 'called-together' assemblies (*sunkletoi ekklesiai*) could also be held.

me see – yes, the equivalent of your original debt so you could pay, hum, yes, a quarter of that back.

DEMOS: That doesn't add up. That makes (*he uses his fingers*) one and three quarters the original debt. (*To audience*) I lost the top of a finger carving a thrush into four portions.

SPARTAN: You're forgetting the interest.

DEMOS: Yes – what exactly is that?

SPARTAN: We had to ask too. Finally we found a kind of prophet or seer or priest of some peculiar new cult – calls himself a 'banker'<sup>36</sup> – who knew the answer. Apparently it's 'the price of money'.

DEMOS: 'The price of money'? That's very odd. Look, suppose I have one drachma – I haven't, of course, but suppose I have – and I want to sell it to you. How much would you give me for it?

SPARTAN: I wouldn't. I'm a Spartan. I never spend unnecessarily.

DEMOS: But you wouldn't be spending – Oh, never mind. Suppose you're an Athenian. How much would you give me for it then?

SPARTAN: One drachma, obviously – however pointlessly.

DEMOS: But according to your – what's his name? – your 'banker,' you'd have to give me two drachmas.

SPARTAN: Yes, it is very odd, isn't it? I really don't think this new cult is going to catch on.

DEMOS: In fact I've got an even better idea than this 'interest'.

SPARTAN: Oh? What?

DEMOS: Let's just forget about it.

SPARTAN: About what?

DEMOS: Obviously you have forgotten about it. Now we can both go home.

Farewell.

SPARTAN: Wait! Do you mean forget about your debt?

DEMOS: Yes – and No. Yes, because I can't pay. No, because it's not *my* debt. It wasn't the people of Athens who borrowed all that money after the war. It was the Thirty Tyrants, those who *you* wanted to rule Athens, so Athens would be your client state. And you gave your wealth to the oligarchs because they

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<sup>36</sup> Such as did exist, in primitive form, in classical Athens, and who charged interest on loans.

persuaded you that they couldn't be true oligarchs without becoming very, very rich. First they tried slaughtering and looting the property of most of the middle class, but that way they didn't make anything like enough to be able to claim that they were the "better people". Because oligarchy to an oligarch isn't rule by the few over the many, but rule of the "better" over the "worse" – and for that, anywhere outside Sparta, you have to have enough money to dazzle people that, somehow, you must have deserved it. Funnily enough, people will believe that, because any other explanation would be *too grotesque!*

SPARTAN: That's all very well, but you're forgetting one detail.

DEMOS: What's that?

SPARTAN: Where is the money now?

DEMOS: Ask the tyrants. I haven't seen any of it.

SPARTAN: I'm afraid, Demos, that the debt was contracted by your government.

That makes you responsible for it.

DEMOS: It wasn't a legitimate government.

SPARTAN: But it was.

DEMOS: It wasn't.

SPARTAN: It was.

DEMOS: Who says?

SPARTAN: The tyrants themselves.

DEMOS: Why believe them rather than me?

SPARTAN: Because they said it when they were *in government*. That makes it official.

DEMOS: But I'm the Sovereign Demos now, and I say –

SPARTAN: But that would be a retrospective.... Ah....

*The SPARTAN has clearly realized something. DEMOS, apparently, has not realized.*

SPARTAN: But Demos, let's not argue like this. Although discipline and frugality tends to make us Spartans stand tall, hard and all juiced up, we are honestly, truly and sincerely sympathetic with the plight of Athenians for whom austerity means having to bend over and spread wide their buttocks in order to pay a debt for which they were not, in the last analysis, responsible. But I have come here to tell you that much of the path towards solving the financial problems of Athens is already behind us – although I wouldn't like to predict at this early stage how much of that path still remains ahead of us. I mean ahead of you. But

probably not much more than a decade. I tell you what: perhaps we can find a way to let you have a little longer – say another half year – to pay everything back. I'll let you know.

*Exit SPARTAN*

DEMOS: I don't get it. What are they talking about, the "problems of Athens"? The Spartans just don't seem to have heard the old saying: if you owe a man 50 drachmas, you've got a problem, but if you owe him 50 talents – that's 300,000 drachmas – he's got a problem. We should just refuse to pay anything back.... But no, no, we can't do that – I'm forgetting – because that's "the alternative which would be much worse". Oh well, I suppose that leaves me no other option. I'll just have to sacrifice my daughter as the prophet advised. She's in there – That's my house, you can recognize it by the 'To Rent' sign – Come to think of it, no, you can't. *Every* house has a 'To Rent' sign now – Anyway, I'll go in and fetch her.

*DEMOS goes inside.*

CHORUS:               Once, long ago, a king called Midas  
                              captured Silenos – the Daddy of the Satyrs  
                              in his garden where wild roses grew. Here  
                              was a prize, immortal, drunken, wise –  
                              so Midas shone on him, dark forest god,  
                              the light of human interrogatives  
                              in lust to know, to know, to know  
                              *What's best for men? For me?*  
                              The cloven-footed creature shied and kicked  
                              tried to break free, but tied, grew tired  
                              relenting, finally dispensed these bitter words:  
                              *Midas, know this, it's better not to know*  
                              *and better far for men not to be born –*  
                              *But you, who dare to think you hold me*  
                              *captive, you must learn this harsher lesson*  
                              *when smiling Dionysos makes you rich*  
                              *deluded, thinking it at first reward –*  
                              *For all you touch will turn to gold.*  
                              *For you, then, rivers will halt, fruit freeze on branches*

*this teeming, generating earth will be as lead  
the surge of your own blood will stop  
and you will be as one who knows not NOW.<sup>37</sup>*

Enter DAUGHTER and DEMOS.

DAUGHTER: O Father mine, it is a wonderful thing that you have asked me to come out here.<sup>38</sup> The street is a more awesome place than I, an innocent girl, could ever have fantasized.

DEMOS: Oh, I am lost for words.

DAUGHTER: Oh, dear. You *say* how happy you are to see me, but your eyes rove everywhere but on me.

DEMOS: I am thinking of my many troubles.

DAUGHTER: O Daddy, forget about silly old troubles for a little while so we can be together. Uncrease your brow and smooth your cheek for a kiss.

DEMOS: I'm smiling now – with love.

DAUGHTER: But there are tears in your eyes.

DEMOS: That's because we are going to be apart for a time. A very long time.

DAUGHTER: Are you going on a long voyage?

DEMOS: No, you are. To another land.

DAUGHTER: Is mother coming with me?

DEMOS: You must go alone – to your new home.

DAUGHTER: But you will come and visit me?

DEMOS: At some time in the future, yes, I suppose I must, but not too soon (I hope).  
But now I have to... make a sacrifice.

DAUGHTER: Oh, yes, Daddy – be sure to make a sacrifice, otherwise I might not get where I'm going safely.

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<sup>37</sup> The story of Silenos's capture by Midas has many forms, but the (reluctant) 'wisdom of Silenos' is usually much as Aristotle reports it in the fragment of the lost *Eudemus* quoted by Plutarch: "... he lives with the least worry who knows not his misfortune; but for humans, the best for them is not to be born at all, not to partake of nature's excellence; not to be is best, for both sexes. This should be our choice, if choice we have; and the next to this is, when we are born, to die as soon as we can." (Trans Scott Horton) In some sources, Midas' power to turn whatever he touched to gold is a reward by Dionysos for releasing Silenos. But this is an odd kind of reward for a god like Dionysos, whose nature is surely antithetical to money, to bestow. The version given here sees it rather as a punishment for having captured the wise old satyr. The idea reflects Richard Seaford's suggestion in *Money and the Early Greek Mind* (305-7) that Midas' power, and money itself, represents a perfect *deferment of living*, to the point of becoming a grotesque parody of immortality.

<sup>38</sup> What follows parodies Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, first performed a few years before the present play.



DEMOS: O, would that that were so!

DAUGHTER: Come on, Daddy. You've got to be mature about this. *I'm* not crying, because it's not as though you're sacrificing *me*, is it? You're just sacrificing your fatherly joy at seeing your darling daughter doting on you all the time.... Did I say something wrong?

DEMOS: O, how augustly outrageous, how sublimely shitty, my miserable fate!

TRAGIC POETS: Child, you will be honoured and remembered...

DAUGHTER: Where did those *very* serious looking men come from, chanting so *very* seriously? Am I in a tragedy? I'm scared.

COMIC POETS: Child, let us instruct you...

DAUGHTER: But these other men look *too* ridiculous. I won't listen to them.

*COMIC POETS go on chanting soundlessly.*

TRAGIC POETS: ... honoured and remembered, yea, for saving Athens, this glorious city, and your name (what is it, by the way?) will be whispered only with devotion, reverently, enough to make the drunk man sober, the fool wise, the libertine temperate.... In any case, it's not impossible that Artemis will whisk you off the altar at the last minute, like she did with Iphi –

DAUGHTER: **WHAT??? ARE YOU JOKING?????**

TRAGIC POETS: We are tragic poets. WE DON'T JOKE!!!

DAUGHTER: I should have listened to the other lot. But they had such big –

COMIC POETS: ... so do it now, especially while your tits are firm as two ripe quinces.

DAUGHTER: That sounds like better advice.... I know. I'll try to persuade him first, and if that fails, I'll be disobedient and just refuse.

Daddy, if I had the tongue of Orpheus, to charm the very stones to follow me, I'd use that magic now. But only these tears, fresh squeezed from the pomegranates of my cheeks – nay, but unripe ones, for these are bitter tears I shed and I'm sure the healthy glow has quite vanished from my face, leaving but a sickly greenish-yellow, so I'm really glad there's no looking glass here – anyway, as I was saying, only these tears, not my poor, inadequate words, are my supplications. They are my argument that you should not take my life, for mere words can always be answered with words, although not so much now that Euripides is dead. And look at my conclusion, I mean this youthful, tender, trembling body. I could even call it succulent. What a waste my death would be!

I do realize that you're short of cash, but surely Artemis is the worst possible goddess to give you lots of dough in exchange for me. At best she might just give you *a doe*. So, since we're reduced to beggary, now that you've finally let me come out into the street, why don't I become a –

DEMOS: But that's exactly it, my child. I have to sacrifice you so that you are *not* reduced to such dishonour. In any case, even the hire price of female flesh has fallen a lot lately, why, I even heard of a recent convert to the order, quite as young as you are, fetching no more than the price of two parrot wrasse and a crayfish.<sup>39</sup> (*To audience*) Mind you, I did have to bargain. But wow, was she full of tricks! Worth eating only sawdust for a week for! If you want, I can give you the address after the show. (*To DAUGHTER*) But you are my own daughter, so can't you be a little bit more like Iphigenia in the tragedy? What did she say? "Because of me, never more will barbarians rape and ravish Greek women".<sup>40</sup> And you can say, "because of me, never more will nice Athenian girls with respectable fathers have to work the streets".

DAUGHTER: O Daddy, you're such a spoilsport. Just think, I could even auction my virginity.

DEMOS: Never! Am I some oriental satrap?

DAUGHTER: Even oriental satraps don't put their own daughters to death.

DEMOS: I'm not 'putting you to death,' as you so simplistically express it. I'm sacrificing you to Artemis.

DAUGHTER: I must have been wrong – Euripides isn't dead after all. Well, when I swore to be obedient to you, I swore it with my tongue, not my mind.<sup>41</sup>

DEMOS: But this is outrageous! I command you to be obedient!

DAUGHTER: Oh, so you command me to be obedient? How do I obey that? If you 'teach me to be taught,' do I learn anything? If you say 'listen to this,' and I ask 'what?' and you say 'what I just said, stupid!' is it *me* who's nuts?

DEMOS: Cease your sophistries! Friends, take her to the altar of tragedy!

TRAGIC POETS: To the cold, stony altar she must go  
Of the blood-thirsting nurturing goddess

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<sup>39</sup> The services of common prostitutes (as distinct from *hetairai*) seem to have been quite cheap in Athens. But maidenheads would normally fetch a high price.

<sup>40</sup> *Iphigenia in Aulis*, 1379-80, trans Walker.

<sup>41</sup> Hippolytos' words in Euripides' *Hippolytos*, line 612, which became a standing joke.

Where new red streams shall flow  
From her lovely white neck which has known no tongue or  
teeth  
Except in her own imagination  
And now we think of it, in our imagination too  
Which is seriously beginning to take over –

COMIC POETS: Not if we can help it! Stop! Turn back!

*The COMIC POETS block the TRAGIC POETS. A brief battle.*

DAUGHTER: Thanks, malformed and gutsy hoplites, with bellies for your shields and mighty cudgel-lancey things.<sup>42</sup> And now I say to him, if you think I'm going to let myself be sacrificed you've got another think coming! Why? Because you can't sacrifice the same thing twice! Sacrifice-wise, I'm second hand, I'm used goods. You, Demos – I no longer call you Father – you have sacrificed me along with all the youth of Athens already! For what future have we got? What jobs? What money? How will we marry, have children? It might have been kinder if you'd sold us into slavery, for at least then we'd have felt useful. But instead you sacrificed us to your new dark and insatiable goddess, crueler than Nemesis, more twisted than Hephaistos, more obscure than Hades, more callous than Ares – not to mention more irrational than Dionysos. You have already sacrificed us to AUSTERITY!

*DAUGHTER goes*

TRAGIC POETS: Truly, in the name of Zeus, this is heroism  
To be sacrificed completely pointlessly.

COMIC POETS: We'd say it was pure folly  
But not hers.

TRAGIC POETS: Into the darkness of hopelessness she goes  
Unwillingly, with dignity.

COMIC POETS: Well, we seem to be unanimous again –  
So let's get on with beating the shit out of Demos.

*As before, the CHORUS advances threateningly on DEMOS.*

DEMOS: Wait, wait!..... She is right. And this is the second time today I've had to admit I've been wrong. But third time lucky!

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<sup>42</sup> An allusion to the standard comic costume with padded buttocks and belly and a large flaccid phallus.

CHORUS: *Please* don't tell us you have another plan.

DEMOS: Not yet, but I am thinking –

CHORUS: A sound beating might help focus your thoughts.

DEMOS: No! For... I've just thought of something! Listen.

CHORUS: This but delays –it deflects not – our justice.

DEMOS: Why do playwrights do that?!!

CHORUS: What?

DEMOS: Use the same line twice. They think it's clever. They think they're reminding the audience of something, drawing its attention to a significant structural parallelism in the action. But from the actor's point of view, it's dangerous. I might mix up my cues and start spouting my earlier speech again; you remember, this one: "I admit that it was my vote that led, indirectly, to this... *sparagmos*, this dismemberment of our choruses and our festivals. As soon as I had cast it, I realized the error of my ways. But fear not, for now I am taking the necessary steps..." And that's a really long speech. If that had happened – which, thank the gods, it hasn't – how would we have managed to get the action back on track? Why don't playwrights think about such things?

CHORUS: No doubt Aristophanes was subtly hinting that *all* your 'great ideas' are true stupfuckdities!<sup>43</sup> But let's go through the motions, anyway. Out with it. What's the latest one?

DEMOS: I've forgotten.... No. No. It's not there....What was I saying?

CHORUS: Let's take it from: "Well, we seem to be unanimous again – / So let's get on with beating the shit out of Demos." OK?

DEMOS: OK.

*As before, the CHORUS advances threateningly on DEMOS.*

DEMOS: Wait, wait!..... She is right. She *was* right. And this is the second time today that I've had to admit I've been wrong. But third time lucky!

CHORUS: *Please* don't tell us you have another plan.

DEMOS: Not yet, but I am thinking –

CHORUS: A sound beating might help focus your thoughts.

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<sup>43</sup> Urbandictionary.com defines 'stupfuckdity' as "epic stupidity to the fuck degree which is a gogolplex higher than the Nth degree" and notes that the word was coined by Sean Bedlam, "an Aussie YouTube Philosopher". It translates Aristophanes' Greek here perfectly.

DEMOS: No! For... I've just thought of something! Listen. DON'T SAY

ANYTHING! – Athena!

CHORUS: You've thought of Athena?

DEMOS: Yes. My thought is, maybe she changed her gold into lead *not only* because she doesn't trust us. Maybe she changed her gold into lead as a *sign* to us.

CHORUS: You mean... not just as a sign that she doesn't trust us?

DEMOS: Yes. Maybe she's trying to tell us that *WE* should hold on to what we've got, that *WE shouldn't pay any money back!*

CHORUS: But – But – But – But – But ....

DEMOS: Yes. That *IS* “the alternative that would be much worse”! But now we've begun thinking the unthinkable, shall we go on? First question: *WHY* would it be much worse? Well, according to – But I see the Messenger hastening here again. Let's hope it's not to say that Pallas herself has been convinced that “the alternative would be much worse” and has changed her lead back to gold.

*Enter MESSENGER.*

MESSENGER:<sup>44</sup> Athenians! Rulers still – but only just – in your own land, I have come from the slopes of Parnitha, not the high pastures where the bright snow never yields its grip, but from the lower parts which even a wrinkly old cripple can scale without getting fatally short of breath.

DEMOS: What weighty word is it you bring us?

MESSENGER: Wonders have I seen, things stranger than most strange. But first I want to know if I can speak airily and freely – without having to pay an obol – or if I should draw in the sail of my speech and hasten straight to my weirder than most weird conclusion. I fear that your Athenian ability to concentrate has never been great, but now –

DEMOS: Speak freely – but in the name of busy Hermes, *not* as lengthily as the messenger speech this is a parody of. That's a hundred lines!

MESSENGER: The sun had reached its zenith in the sky when I too, by coincidence, was halfway through my toilsome task of visiting all Attic villages to tell of Pallas' transmutation. All yokels listened rapt to hear how shiny, visionary opulence had been replaced by dusky, dull and introverted gloom. ‘That's life,’ said one, in rustic wisdom, ‘you win some and you lose some – though some

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<sup>44</sup> This parodies the Messenger's speech in Euripides' *Bacchae*, 660-774.

others are drawn'. 'You still can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear,' chipped in another. 'There's nowt so strange as folk,' observed a third – 'excepting gods and goddesses'. At this, I felt a strange repose come over me – it was the Wisdom of the Ages – and thought me how a cottage in the country would suffice. O City, City – you know not what this life is all about, how little man requires for happiness! A little back-breaking, dawn-till-dusk hard labour in the rocky fields never hurt anyone. Collapsing exhausted and unconscious onto a straw mat straight after supper is far to be preferred to staying up all night trying to square the circle or out-drink Socrates.

But to my tale. The rural folk had just begun to shake their heads and mutter charms, low as a murmuring muddy brook, when someone's voice rose clear in puzzlement: "Thass very queer," it said, "I could've sworn my olive grove was over there – not there!" Another said, "You'm right at that. It was. But now 'tis elsewhere. Thass rum." At that a third declared, "Well, bless my boots – your olive trees be on the move. Thass not 'appened afore." Whereon all present looked and saw – O wondrous scene! The air of heaven fell silent, the leaves of the forest all held themselves in breathless stillness and no sound of animals was heard,<sup>45</sup> while every olive tree around was pulling up its roots, and shifting, lurching, walking! Thus, as a thousand little rivulets and streams, however puny, flow on down into the one great, swelling, hill-dividing river, all olive trees conjoined, a mighty army on the march – towards this city, Athens; but slowly, very slowly, seen only when you look a second time, much like the horses of the sun, or dolphins of the moon – and as we watched, Time, great Time, seemed strangely born again, but now a different kind of god – gentler, more truly healing, but also less forgiving. We humans stood transfixed, rooted like trees ourselves. None spoke. What could we say? Words would have served but to proclaim their own defeat. We stood like this, open in eye and mouth, till finally we saw the landscape cleared, a desert. Then, like Helen's losing suitors, we broke up, each separate, alone, still speechless, not knowing what it was he'd seen, whether portending good or bad or something else entirely, *beyond* both good and bad – for if this was a sign, it was a sign that seemed to say

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Bacchae* 1084-5

“Man! This is not for you. You are too late. You are now irrelevant.” And so I came straight here. I’ve told you all I saw. But what it means, who knows?

*Exit MESSENGER*

TRAGIC POETS: I fear Athena’s wrath! It’s obvious to me that, having made divinely sure she keeps her gold, now she’s withdrawing her sacred gift to us, the olive tree, with which she won the city from Poseidon. And then what? Inundations and earthquakes!<sup>46</sup> Well, smartarse, how can you turn *this* into a happy ending?

COMIC POETS: A happy ending! You think comedy just means a happy ending? Always look on the bright side of life? You call the cup half-empty and I call it half-full? Your stoical, high-minded reality-checks versus my masturbatory, wish-fulfilling fantasies? Your profound insights into the complex metaphysical entanglement of justice with injustice as against the infantile satisfactions of my simplistic scatological polymorphous perversity? Listen, *mate* – I’m telling you that comedy out-rocks tragedy any time it comes to the shit hitting the fan. You think we’re about to be trashed by the gods? Well, I think we’re our own worst enemies – and that’s much worse!

TRAGIC POETS: But what of the miracle?

COMIC POETS: My guess is, the Messenger happened to stumble across one of the village festivals, you know, where they’re all drunk from dawn but still try to do some amateur dramatics. I’ll bet that was just *apo mechane elaionas*.<sup>47</sup>

TRAGIC POETS: I’ll bet it wasn’t.

COMIC POETS: That’s your problem: you never go for the simple, rational explanation.

TRAGIC POETS: Let’s go see for ourselves.

COMIC POETS: All right. You’re on. Let’s go.

*Exit the CHORUS*

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<sup>46</sup> In the time of Kekrops, so the story goes, Poseidon and Athena vied for the post of patron divinity of Athens. Poseidon struck the soil and out came a spring of salt water – an impressive trick. But Athena planted the first olive tree. The Athenians preferred this because it was useful. The tragic poets suggest that when Athena withdraws her patronage, Poseidon – god of the sea and earthquakes – will feel free to take his revenge.

<sup>47</sup> The phrase *apo mechane theos*, usually translated into English as *deus ex machina*, means the god from the machine. The ‘machine’ was a crane used in performances for flying (usually) gods in or out. Aristophanes refers to it regularly and uses it in *Peace* and *Birds*. Plays were performed in the rural Dionysia but surely not with a crane, let alone one capable of lifting an olive grove (*elaionas*)!

DEMOS: Wait, wait! I'd like to come too. But how can I leave these people all alone?

If I do that, they'll start fighting and throwing litter into the orchestra and singing rowdy songs, and there's no way Aristophanes will win the prize like that. Hey! Aren't there any other characters out there to come and take my place in here? Or has everyone gone off to see the wonder of wonders except me? (*To audience*) Sorry about this. If we *are* just making this up as we go along, I seem to have been improvised into an impasse. Um... Ah! I see someone coming after all. It looks like a Theban. Yes, and there's a Herald with him so he's obviously going to announce the result of the inspection. I suppose I'd better stay for that.

*Enter THEBAN with HERALD*

HERALD: Listen, all of you! Silence! Let everyone be quiet! That's enough in the back row there! Pay attention! I heard that, Krattippos! Just look at your own buttocks.... In a lake, obviously – a big one! And as for you, Hipponicos, you can stop sniggering.... Right, the next person who makes a farting noise like that will be whipped. Yes, Socrates, I'm looking at you.... What do you mean, if Zeus farts in the forest and there's no one near enough to hear, does it make thunder? Silence!!!

THEBAN: That's enough, stop! Heralds, like all Athenian public servants, are paid either by the word or by the stamp, so that's quite enough of saying the same thing over and over again.

HERALD: But –

THEBAN: Sorry, you'll not be paid for that one. And don't stand around here merely adding to my status like that. I feel quite important enough as it is. After all, I've got *bad* news.

*Exit HERALD*

THEBAN: It's no good, Demos, the situation's simply getting worse. We can't release the next part of the loan which we promised you months ago unless you make some more cuts.

DEMOS: There's nothing more to cut.

THEBAN: Nonsense! You may have reduced the size of many of the festivals, cutting your choruses in half, for example, but have you thought of combining tragedy and comedy in the same play?



DEMOS: (*To audience*) You know, that's not a bad idea. We could use some sniffly 'tragic relief' in some of our rib-busting comedies.

THEBAN: And what about chopping some of the festivals themselves? This one, let's say – the Lenaia. After all, Athens has twice as many public festivals as any other city state in Hellas. How can you possibly become competitive if you insist on enjoying yourselves even in the middle of winter? It's not just the huge expense of mounting them, but the fact that during your festivals no one works – not even your lucrative law courts – have you thought of that?

DEMOS: Now no one works when it's *not* a festival – have you thought of that?

THEBAN: You'll see, soon the foreign investment will come rolling in, once we manage to get the price of your labour more on a par with a helot's<sup>48</sup>.

DEMOS: A helot gets nothing except beatings and the occasional summary execution.

THEBAN: But you're ignoring all the perks.

DEMOS: What perks?

THEBAN: Well, they're allowed to breed, aren't they? That's more than most Greek slaves can say.

DEMOS: Yes, and to keep the population under control their Spartan masters regularly declare war on them so they can slaughter some, all perfectly legally.

THEBAN: Checks and balances, checks and balances. That's what you've been forgetting in Athens. You've got far too used to having your cake and eating it. That's unsustainable, you know.

DEMOS: And starving isn't unsustainable?

THEBAN: But now you're on the right track, getting leaner and fitter all the time. And you do want the next part of the loan, don't you? After all, without it what would happen? The unthinkable alternative. Chaos! Anarchy! Fighting over scraps! Dog eat dog!

DEMOS: I'm not so sure any more....

THEBAN: You only need a few more cuts.

DEMOS: I'm so lean and fit by now, only my foreskin's left.

THEBAN: For example, your city raises war orphans at public expense.

DEMOS: What? Are you mad! The children of heroes can't be left to scavenge in the street!

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<sup>48</sup> The Spartan slave class.

THEBAN: Of course not. I'm a compassionate man. My suggestion is that the city continues to raise them, but at *their own* expense. How, you will ask? By first granting them a loan so that they can pay for their own upbringing! They'll only have to pay the money back when they're grown up and (hopefully) earning.

DEMOS: But how would that help?

THEBAN: Simple. We can consider the money you spend as not having been spent at all. It has all simply been put in the 'treasury of the future'.

DEMOS: I don't get it. In the 'empty cupboard of *right now*,' loaning means coughing up.

THEBAN: You just said it. You can't 'cough up' for the orphans right now, can you? And we'll only release more funds to you when you agree to this measure.

DEMOS: No! It is too dishonourable!

THEBAN: Very well. You'll only have yourself to blame.

*Exit THEBAN*

DEMOS: (*alone*) What is to be done, what is to be done? (*To audience*) Look, sorry, but this time I really do have to leave you alone. The situation has become too serious and I really need somewhere quieter to think, a spiritual sanctuary equipped with a hole in the ground. I'll be back as quickly as I can, but it's an emergency!

*DEMOS goes off.*

*Enter CHORUS OF OLIVE TREES.*

OLIVE TREES: Now that we have arrived in the heart of the city, let us embark upon our anapests,<sup>49</sup> for the chorus of tragic and comic poets would have failed, in circumstances so exceptional, to do a proper job of this.

Many years have passed since Aristophanes first took the prize for instructing you in matters concerning the fortune of the city, although he would have much preferred the accolade of your more serious attention, in other words that you had swallowed the medicine of his advice, not spat it out. Many times since that first victory he has been tempted to say, "I told you so". But now, in a twist of plot that no one would have guessed, we are stepping forward to say:

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<sup>49</sup> References like this to "our anapests" are common in Aristophanes as a way of introducing the part of the play known as the *parabasis*, in which the chorus directly addresses the audience on behalf of the poet about issues related to – and sometimes unrelated to – the play.

Aristophanes! You got it seriously wrong in your play *Peace*!<sup>50</sup> Sweet-scented plenty, luscious sensual indulgence and a feast of rural fun and games replaced the savage grind and gory stench of war *too easily*. For we –eternal, sacred olive trees – survived the Spartan axe and fire,<sup>51</sup> year after year, but now, in barren peace, we face annihilation by a tax – one drachma for each tree – which not a single farmer can afford. Death, said Solon, is the punishment for anyone uprooting one of us.<sup>52</sup> But now what choice is left the man who can no longer press and sell our gleaming oil? For you Athenians have passed a law that confiscates all property of suicides.

You creatures of a day, you passing see-through shadows less than dreams, you who are blown about, this way and that, by gusting inner winds – ambition, anger, pride – scuttling and thronging on this ancient earth like overweening insects, you who live in the fog of your own ingenuity, listen to our voice that’s rooted in the earth, the undiminishing earth that’s ever-old and ever-young, and listen to this fruit of words sprung from un-aging wisdom. For we have come to tell you who you really are.

Prometheus it was who led you from the sunless caves, they say, made you the architects of your own little lives. Fire in this fable stands for more than barbecues and forging steel, it stands for ‘light’ – up-visioning the value-add of human life to put you In The Loop.<sup>53</sup> Yet all his gift to you of number, weight and measure made you merely wily, canny, calculating – good at contrivances, devices, tricks. But don’t imagine he did this to help you, nor that mighty Zeus opposed it – that tall tale is just a ruse. No, the gods were bored with immortality, so all agreed to start a show with daily episodes – *la comédie humaine* – with which to laugh themselves half-mortal. But Pallas Athena’s gift, the olive tree, which was bestowed on you sincerely, later, was enough to *nearly* civilize you, nearly enough to make you god-like – in spite of how you’d been

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<sup>50</sup> *Peace* was performed in 421. In it, Trygaios ascends to Olympus on the back of a dung beetle and rescues Peace, who has been incarcerated by War. There follows Trygaios’s marriage to ‘Fullfruit,’ a handmaiden of Peace, amid much feasting.

<sup>51</sup> During the Peloponnesian War the Spartans often raided the Attic countryside to lay it waste and disrupt agricultural production.

<sup>52</sup> Because olive trees were considered sacred. Solon’s law was passed a century earlier.

<sup>53</sup> This is very much how the story is presented in *Prometheus Bound* 442-506 (if you can decode the corporate bullshit adopted for this translation).

so conned before by joker gods. For unlike fire, the oil of olives does not stand for anything, mere sign. It *is* enlightenment of human life!

Radiant and silky, lustrous and pure,  
Light in liquid form, loading air  
With subtle perfumes, anointing hair and limb  
With gracious beauty, making more flavoursome  
Both the raw and the cooked, great for dipping bread in,  
Granting good digestion to young and to old,  
Curing diseases and skin conditions and helping get  
The spines of sea urchins out from careless feet –  
Only conceivable prize in the Games!  
With so many amazing uses you must be divine!<sup>54</sup>

But you, you wretched creatures who, like snails, carry your dismal caves of unenlightenment on your backs, you who suffer from the disease of never being satisfied, you preferred instead to tear the yielding earth, to scar, rip out and slice her silver veins, and then – oh, horror! – to stamp on these your cunning images conferring perfect *uselessness*! You minted coins! On seeing this, the laughing gods grew still and pale, as if another god had just been born, abstract, unbreathing, bloodless, belonging everywhere and nowhere, blind and far-reaching as disease. “I am all things,” the new god said, “save one. Men will adore me for as long as they know not the one thing I am not.”

Obscure, the unborn moon, the child  
That never cries. An old man’s leg is locked  
With a key. The owl howls  
In place of the wolf. All is one.  
The ocean dry / the land full of salt.  
It is the Age of Equivalence. What you caress  
Becomes ash. Seeds yield a seedless crop. Point  
At what you want, even unto the horizon.  
Is it the Air  
That is not the new god? No – the air is fenced like fields.

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<sup>54</sup> In ancient Greece olive oil was used for cooking, as a salad dressing, as a base for perfumes, in medicine and therapy, as a hair dressing, for rubbing on athletes’ bodies, in religious ceremonies and as the prize in athletics contests. Naturally it was considered to be divine.

Is it the Good?

No. Now all things are good. And none.

Is it Truth?

Now only Socrates refuses payment.

Could it be Shame that is worthless and priceless

No longer known?

Consider. The earth lurches sideways and a sickening fear grips your guts. Winter winds stack the sea sky-high, smashing your ships. The human body is consumed from inside by fierce heat and raging thirst that blisters the skin. Remember these things. Pray to the true gods that you avoid them. But don't call on the old gods to help you escape from a man-made catastrophe! Nor on the new god. For your new god, Money, is also your child – and will eat you.

*The CHORUS OF OLIVE TREES goes.*

*Enter DEMOS.*

DEMOS: (*To audience*) Sorry about that. I hope you've not been bored. It's just that I've not been regular in my habits lately – not enough olive oil in my diet, the price has gone through the roof – and things sort of built up to a climax or came to a crunch – well, not exactly a crunch, more of a sloppy explosion. I didn't know you could have so much shit inside you. But now everything's... clearer. In fact, I've decided. I am *not not not* going to have the war orphans pay for their own up-bringing. Yes, I do understand what this means – I'm choosing “the alternative which is much worse”. But what else can I do? I have to tear up the agreement with our Spartan and Theban creditors and simply refuse to pay anything back.

Now, I ought to be completely honest with you, since you're Athenians too, we're all in this together, and there's something I didn't tell you yet. The agreement I'm going to tear up is a legally binding document and one of its clauses says that I must *not* tear it up. That's OK, you might say, no problem, just tear it up and then go to the law courts to have it “annulled” – that's the proper legal term for tearing contracts up – because it was unjust, unfair, inequitable, unreasonable, impractical and, as any good lawyer<sup>55</sup> would tell you, plain fucking daft. Well, that's exactly what I would do except for this one thing

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<sup>55</sup> Aristophanes refers to an ‘orator’ here, for there were no lawyers as such. But ‘lawyer’ works better in translation.

– the thing I didn’t tell you yet: our Spartan and Theban creditors insisted that the agreement was made under Korinthian law, not Athenian law, precisely so we couldn’t tear it up legally, only illegally. Now wait, wait! Just be quiet and let me explain. I didn’t have any choice. Yes, I know I was sacrificing my own sovereignty but I... Yes, you’re right, I admit everything, but... but... I... No, no excuses! I hereby call you all to witness that I, Demos, am turning Informer against myself,<sup>56</sup> having caught myself ex post facto in the act of betraying my own city. I shall upstage Oedipus by knowingly demanding my own exile.<sup>57</sup> Never more to look on this fair land again. Never more to watch a chorus dancing in the Theatre of Dionysos. Yes, perhaps exile is a bit too harsh. In fact, why should I care about any code other than my own? I don’t give a goat’s fart for Korinthian law! Am I Korithinan? No! I am Athenian, as yet unostracized!<sup>58</sup> Now I, Demos, must denounce myself again, but this time for having fallen so low as to become a Sycophant! Shame on me! Good, now that’s all cleared up, just wait a moment, since I have to go inside and get the agreement so I can tear it up in public.

*DEMOS goes inside.*

*Enter CHORUS OF TRAGIC AND COMIC POETS*

CHORUS: We have come from the *Bouleutirion*, where the leaders of Athens are now holed up and under siege. O wondrous and inspiring sight, one to make our grandchildren think, when we tell them of it, that we’ve finally lost our wits! Whenever one among the *Bouleutai*<sup>59</sup> dares to stick out his head from the door, ten thousand olive trees all pelt him with their fruit; then what a surging sound of roaring southerlies that sea of branches makes! The olive trees of Attica are showing us the way! Come, Demos, where are you? We must all join this rebellion!

*Enter DEMOS with the contract in the form of a very large roll.*

DEMOS: Poets! You’re just in time to get a new heroic subject for your songs.

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<sup>56</sup> Informers (*sycophants*) are reviled in several plays by Aristophanes. See *Plutos* especially.

<sup>57</sup> Oedipus pronounced exile for the killer of Laios, unaware that the killer was himself.

<sup>58</sup> In ancient Athens, ostracism meant exile for ten years.

<sup>59</sup> *Bouleutai* were members of the Council of 500 which met in the *Bouleutirion*. It would be misleading to translate this as ‘MPs’ and ‘Parliament’ respectively, so I have left these words as they are (though ‘Councilors’ and ‘City Council’ might do).

CHORUS: What can you add to what we've seen? Will you tell us, perhaps, that the pine trees have started dancing the *Sikinnis*<sup>60</sup>?

DEMOS: I have decided to tear in shreds, as if it were another Pentheus, this heavy document, for I suppose you could say that, in an odd way, I'm its mother, or at least the midwife – and I'll need your help, so you can play my sisters<sup>61</sup> – it's got so many articles and clauses and sinews and arms and legs that we must all join our strengths and strain mightily to pull it to pieces together.

CHORUS: Willingly, Demos. We're both<sup>62</sup> getting carried away by the potential for epic mayhem and destruction here. Let's call on Dionysos in the front row<sup>63</sup> to lend a little superhuman frenzy to our efforts...

*Enter SPARTAN and THEBAN.*

SPARTAN: Stop!

THEBAN: Stop!

SPARTAN: At once!

THEBAN: At once!

SPARTAN: You can't do that!

THEBAN: You can't do that!

DEMOS: We can. We can. Aren't you two supposed to be in favour of efficiency?

SPARTAN: We are.

THEBAN: We are.

DEMOS: So why are you both here? It ought to be obvious even to you that at least one of you is redundant script-wise. But I've got news for you. You can *both* go home. We're tearing this agreement up!

SPARTAN: Then we Spartans will have no choice but to install a permanent garrison in Athens.

THEBAN: (*to SPARTAN*) My friend, we Thebans cannot approve of that.<sup>64</sup> Our goal is to make Athenian debt sustainable in the long term, hence we are prepared to renegotiate article five hundred and twenty-three, clause seventy-one.

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<sup>60</sup> A highly energetic dance performed by satyrs.

<sup>61</sup> In Euripides' *Bacchae*, Pentheus is dismembered by his own mother, Agave, in maenadic frenzy, aided by her sisters and the other bacchantes.

<sup>62</sup> The tragic poets and the comic poets.

<sup>63</sup> Both a statue of the god and his priest sat in places of honour in the front row of the theatre.

<sup>64</sup> Thebes had supported the restoration of Athenian democracy in 403 as a check on Spartan hegemony.

SPARTAN: (*to THEBAN*) My friend, we Spartans cannot possibly accept that.

Letting the poor warm themselves at the public baths in winter will only make them soft and unwilling to work.

THEBAN: A permanent garrison will be expensive.

SPARTAN: So will not getting our loaned wealth<sup>65</sup> back.

THEBAN: Thebes will not tolerate Spartan military occupation of Attica!

SPARTAN: Sparta will not accept any change to the agreement that would result in less increase in Spartan discipline in Athens!

THEBAN: Quiet, you fool!! (*To DEMOS*) He meant to say “less increase in competitiveness”.

DEMOS: There’s no need to wet your shoes. We’ve already realized what’s going on here. You Boeotians don’t like Spartan hegemony, so you tricked the Laconians out of any military occupation of Athens by promising them that they could transform Athens into a kind of neo-Sparta instead. You told them that, to do so, they’d have to con us Athenians into accepting Spartan discipline by calling it “increased competitiveness”. But all the time your plan *was* to make Athens “more competitive” after all, in a certain sophistical, arse-end-up sense meaning dirt cheap – so *you* could move in, buy up land, houses, businesses, slaves, the lot, all for next to nothing.

SPARTAN: Is this true?

THEBAN: But my good friend, were we not allies during the long war?

SPARTAN: Is it true?

THEBAN: And don’t we have a clear common interest in making sure Athens never gets rich again?

SPARTAN: Is it true?

THEBAN: But surely such a cunning plan is too clever for us Boeotians. We’re almost as stupid as you are, after all.

SPARTAN: (*Uncertainly*) That’s just a clever argument.

THEBAN: No, no, it isn’t. Really, truly, it was the... Corinthians who suggested it to us. Honestly. They’re the ones who want to buy up Athens cheap and develop it as a kind of super-brothel for foreign visitors.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The Spartan is reluctant to refer to ‘money’.

<sup>66</sup> Corinth was the most commercially minded of the city states and the ‘prostitution capital’ of Hellas. But the Theban’s argument is probably a ruse.



SPARTAN: What! Those scheming traitors! I must return to Sparta to consider the Spartan position.

DEMOS: You mean the one where naked boys are told to touch their toes!<sup>67</sup>

*Exit SPARTAN*

THEBAN: And I must return to Thebes to consider the Theban position.

DEMOS: The basic missionary, but still sucking the breast!<sup>68</sup>

*Exit THEBAN*

DEMOS: Come on, poets and true friends! Let's launch a thousand ships with little sails in the bright air of this new day!

*With much grunting effort, DEMOS and the CHORUS manage to tear the contract into pieces. They dance in celebration, but this 'cools,' slows and stops. They start looking around them, a little anxiously, as if expecting something.*

DEMOS: What happens next?

TRAGIC POETS: I *think* we got away with it. Maybe we can really celebrate.

COMIC POETS: Don't count your chickens until they're hatched.

DEMOS: Why this role reversal?

TRAGIC POETS: In terms of genre, this is uncharted territory.

COMIC POETS: This ending is becoming unpredictable.

*Enter MONEY. Whenever he moves, there is a clicking, clacking, jangling noise like many coins.*

TRAGIC POETS: Can you hear... a sort of giant purse?

DEMOS: It does sound like money. Lots of money.... No, it can't be – it's that thin, sneaky looking fellow who's just turned up. He must have *serious* arthritis.

MONEY: Want a boy? Fair/dark, slim and wiry/soft and fleshy, name your type, all eager for instruction by a mature gent, all perfectly hairless (except the gorgeous curls on top), lovely sweet fluty voices – I got boys. Five drachmas the half-day, exclusive individual rights. Ten drachmas any four of you to share. Full daily, weekly and monthly rates on request.

DEMOS: No, thank you.

MONEY: Girls, then. I got girls too. Virgins. Young women. Experienced women. Matronly types. Guaranteed pure foreign, the full caboodle, Scythian to Egyptian. Charge by sliding scale, starts at seven drachmas daily for a twelve

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<sup>67</sup> To be sodomized.

<sup>68</sup> An allusion to Oedipus having sex with his mother.

year-old (not a virgin, mind you, not at give-away prices like that), knock one obol off per year on the clock, so if you've only got the one spare drachma, say – quick calculation – it's a forty-eight year-old for you, but fully toothed, all dolled up with white lead and grateful with it.

DEMOS: No, no, thank you. Another day, perhaps.

MONEY: Cloaks, shoes, cheeses, wheels for carriages, little statues of gods, perfumes, coffins, chamber pots, cushions, mathematical instruments, wine skins, spittoons, bricks, leather thongs, whatever you desire or need, you name it, if I've not got it, I can get it – all with this guarantee, I'm selling absolutely nothing I've made, grown or caught myself, it's all true merchandise, bought cheap and sold dear.

DEMOS: Who are you?

MONEY: Real estate perhaps? Premises to live in, do business in (no questions asked), store stuff in (no questions asked) – very reasonable rent, only in advance – you choose your very own prime location and not to worry if it's not yet vacant, your half-year deposit guarantees it soon will be.

DEMOS: No!

MONEY: Loans, then. You must owe money, everyone owes money. Say you owe Admetos 10 drachmas, Basilides 20 drachmas, Gordias 30 drachmas – I lend you 60, you pay all your friends back, everything's rosy in the friendship garden again, and you end up with just the one debt, not three. Magic! Simplicity itself. As long as you pay me back within the month, it'll cost you just the 80 all together, plus my legal fees.

DEMOS: You vile and vicious monster! I suggest you get out of here. Fast!

MONEY: You can't get rid of me.

DEMOS: Why not?

MONEY: Because you created me your master.

DEMOS: I, Demos, have no master!

MONEY: No? I am Money. I really have to hand it to you mortals: you've invented ships, agriculture, cookery, nets and snares, warfare, a whole raft of ingenious contraptions, all of which serve you in one way or another, but you really excelled yourselves by creating a new god – Me.

DEMOS: Are you saying that *we* serve *you*?

MONEY: I am.

DEMOS: A whore-herd<sup>69</sup>, a salesmen<sup>70</sup> and a loan shark?

MONEY: Don't mock my mysteries. You know what Dionysos did in Thebes when no one would accept his divinity, don't you?<sup>71</sup> We gods are touchy about things like that.

DEMOS: You a god! We invented you as a means of exchange.

*MONEY laughs uproariously*

MONEY: Me – a means? That's hilarious. I am *an end*.

DEMOS: You're just a measure of value.

MONEY: I am the destroyer of all value other than my own.

DEMOS: No – you are useless in yourself. At best you're a way of storing value for the future.

MONEY: You fool! I withhold happiness even as I promise it. That way, nobody ever gets enough of me.

DEMOS: There are some who desire you too much, I'll admit that.

MONEY: No! It is *I* who destroy cities, *I* turn families out into the street, *I* lead honest men into disgrace. Why? Because I must increase. Men think it is they who desire wealth, but it is I, Money, that work my end through men – the end of my own eternal accumulation. I merely spit men out, the seed husks of themselves.

DEMOS: But what for?

MONEY: Because I am what I am. I know no love, no hatred, no pride, no shame, no laughter, no tears. I turn everything into one thing – myself. And I have appeared to you in my true form because you have wronged me, Demos. By refusing to pay back your debt, you have undermined the tribute that I must have from men. Confidence! It is my blood. Without the confidence that my tokens will be worth the same tomorrow as they are today, I begin to wither, to shrink, to fade away. You have wronged me – and I have come to make you suffer for it, that others shall learn to honour me truly.

DEMOS: But how? Haven't we just rejected suffering by rejecting Austerity?

MONEY: Austerity herself will explain.

*Enter AUSTERITY*

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<sup>69</sup> A pimp. But this more literally translates .

<sup>70</sup> Literally a merchant – but this doesn't have quite the same negative associations in modern English.

<sup>71</sup> This, of course, is the story told in Euripides' *Bacchae*.

AUSTERITY: I am Austerity,<sup>72</sup> recently born, born again, no longer what I long was. Money sent me to you. I did not wish it. Like Madness when she first refused to visit Heracles, I argued, resisted, said I would not cause this City of the Festivals to choke and freeze to death its children.<sup>73</sup> But he – upstart yet strongest of the nether gods – insisted. “Compassion,” he decreed, “is not your part. You are no longer plain and simple Poverty, which serves to motivate the farmer and the artisan to honest work.<sup>74</sup> The world has changed its ancient ways – for what has honest work got to do with me, with Money? Austerity is now your name, and you more cruel than any thief. The less a man has, the more you must take from him. You must snatch the food from a hungry child’s mouth to give to the bloated, the indolent and the insatiable. Where Justice weighs all equally, you – her perfect negation – must give to those that have what you take from those that have not. Such redistribution is necessary to my plan.” Those were his words. I call upon the Sun and Moon to witness, when I came to bleed you dry and grind you in the dust, I did so unwillingly.

DEMOS: But why didn’t you refuse him, just like we’ve refused you?

AUSTERITY: Because then I’d be out of a job – like you.

DEMOS: What do you mean ‘out of a job – like me’?

AUSTERITY: That is Money’s revenge. Athens is now the first ever city state to have an official unemployment rate of 100%.

DEMOS: What! That’s terrible!

CHORUS: Demos, take care –

DEMOS: But who will bake our bricks or build our ships, who will scatter our seeds on our earth that hasn’t even been ploughed, who will sweep our turds from the back alleys, play the flute at banquets, who will stitch and embroider, or catch delicious octopus, or weave carpets, or...

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<sup>72</sup> Ἀραγή in the original which means robbery, plunder, despoiling. There is no word in ancient Greek quite like our own ‘austerity’ in its economic sense, but such ‘austerity’ is exactly what the character goes on to describe as well as being what the play as a whole is about.

<sup>73</sup> In Euripides’ *Heracles*, Lyssa (Madness) is sent by Hera to drive Heracles temporarily mad so that he kills his wife and children. When she demurs, Iris tells her that she is the servant of the gods and has no choice in the matter.

<sup>74</sup> Poverty appears in Aristophanes’ later play *Plutos* to make exactly this argument. But though this is a powerful scene, it is completely out of place within the play as a whole. I suspect a ‘cut and paste’ job here and that the scene in the 388 BCE play was originally in Aristophanes’ earlier, but lost, *Plutos* of 408 BCE when Poverty was still simple Poverty.

CHORUS: Demos, you are being blinded by numbers. Remember the old saying, 'you can prove anything with numbers'? That is all Money is, mere empty digits.

MONEY: I do not eat bread, true. You look thinner already, Demos.

DEMOS: I haven't even got the cash to start panic buying!

CHORUS: Do not believe it! More than Zeus himself, Money feeds on your belief.

MONEY: That is also true. But I am not *in your mind*, Demos. I am in the *universal mind*, created for me, by me. It's none of my business, of course, but why not start looting your neighbour?

DEMOS: Oh, what am I to do?

CHORUS: Poets, remember the olive trees! Demos never saw them in action, so it's not surprising he can't distinguish between fiction and reality. We need them now, here, to show him the true value of things, not their price. The problem is, we've had to produce this play on a very low budget, times are hard – I mean in reality – and we can't possibly afford to have two choruses on at the same time. But if *we* go off, Demos will certainly be *re-persuaded* that.... What are the odds... Aphrodite's big toe... Heracles' club and six kittens... a Thracian ribbon-vendor told me... the Sicilian diet is best, true... he was hidden inside a cartload of bran...

*As the CHORUS 'winds down,' DEMOS steps forward to speak to the audience, out of character.*

ACTOR: Unfortunately, this is where the recently discovered manuscript of the play becomes too badly damaged to read with any certainty. In other words, the last lines of Aristophanes' long lost play *Austerity* are still long lost. We thought and thought about how it might have ended – above all, did it end in victory or defeat for Demos, the people of Athens? – but finally we decided it was better to leave it to you, the audience, to think of the ending, happy or sad, that your own imagination is capable of cooking up. You see, we would never be so presumptuous as to present you something *as if it was* by Aristophanes, when in fact it wasn't.

But we can't just end like this, can we? After all, you may have noticed a remarkable resemblance between the crisis in ancient Athens that Aristophanes was writing about and the crisis we're going through right now....

*They sing:*

Thucydides, at the start of his Histories,  
Said: history *will* repeat itself. (He did too.)<sup>75</sup>  
There's loads of things you don't get right the first time –  
Like marriage or a sonnet or a soufflé –  
Let's follow Marx and call that Tragedy.  
But get it wrong a second time – that's Farce!<sup>76</sup>

Today, is it 'the same but different'? No!  
Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.  
We learn nothing from history except that we learn nothing from history.  
The Emperor's still upon his throne – in yet another suit of clothes!

What *would* old Aristophanes say  
If he found himself still around – today?  
“You have to be joking!  
You cannot be serious!  
Haven't you changed the old tune yet,  
That when the rich fuck up, the poor are told to pay?”

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<sup>75</sup> “It will be enough for me... if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events that happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future.” 1.22 (trans Warner)

<sup>76</sup> “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Chapter 1.