

**Sarah Miles**

*Gods and heroes in comic space. A stretch of the imagination?*

**Abstract**

The article explores the stage movement of gods, heroes and mythical figures in Aristophanic stage space. All four of the Aristophanic comedies that contain these characters (*Peace*, *Birds*, *Frogs* and *Wealth*) are found to adhere to the same patterns of stage movement whereby the comic protagonist must be the first to initiate contact with a divine, heroic or mythical character and will do so by undertaking a journey away from the city to find that character. Gods, heroes and mythical figures do not just turn up anywhere anyhow in comedy, and the question is why. How do you deal with gods in comic space? In tackling these questions, the discussion juxtaposes the contexts of dramatic performance alongside religious contexts of human-divine interaction. This offers a way of considering the perspective of a 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE audience who had experience both of the theatre and of various religious activities. Aristophanic stagecraft is observed for the ways in which it makes the divine and mythical plausible to audience-members, whose lives were shaped by their relationship with gods and heroes. This relationship is reflected even in comic drama. The discussion of comic drama enables a comparison to be drawn with the role and movement of the divine in tragedy.

L'articolo indaga i movimenti scenici di dèi, eroi e figure mitiche nello spazio scenico delle commedie di Aristofane. Quattro delle commedie aristofanee in cui è attivo questo genere di personaggi (*Pace*, *Uccelli*, *Rane* e *Pluto*) risultano aderenti a medesimi schemi di movimento scenico, nella misura in cui il protagonista comico dev'essere il primo a prendere contatto con un personaggio divino, eroico o mitico e lo farà intraprendendo un viaggio lontano dalla *polis* alla ricerca di quel personaggio. In commedia, dèi, eroi e figure mitiche non appaiono in qualunque luogo e in qualunque modo, e la domanda è: perché? Come ci si rapporta agli dèi nello spazio comico? Nell'affrontare tali questioni la discussione pone i contesti della *performance* drammatica a confronto con i corrispondenti contesti religiosi nei quali avviene l'interazione umano-divino. Il che offre l'opportunità di considerare la prospettiva di un pubblico formato da spettatori del V sec. a.C., che avevano esperienza tanto di teatro quanto di varie attività religiose. Vengono esaminate le modalità con cui sulla scena aristofanea la dimensione divina e quella mitica vengono rese plausibili agli occhi di spettatori le cui esistenze erano plasmate dal loro essere in relazione con dèi ed eroi. E questa relazione si riflette anche nella *pièce* comica. La discussione sulla commedia consente infine di istituire un parallelo con i ruoli e i movimenti delle divinità nella tragedia.

*Introduction*

It is one of the great frustrations of working on Aristophanic comedy that we have lost so many of the distinct features of this live-performance genre; for any comic play in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE we know so little about the sound in the theatre – the music, the use of voices and intonation, the dance, the noise from the audience. We also have little

knowledge about the visual side – the look of the theatre, the actual costumes, the props, masks, character movement, the use of gesture in a particular play. Worst of all for interpreting comic drama, we lack that most vital component: timing. Textual and visual sources provide some images of performance, though often post-dating the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE<sup>1</sup>. All we have of the individual plays are their words. Despite this pessimistic outlook, when it comes to reading Aristophanic comedy it is only when we think about all these performative elements of the plays that the visual, verbal and musical vitality of this type of drama becomes evident. The plays themselves are filled with frantic stage action and visual gags. Comic plays are distinct from tragedies in their quick turn around of stage characters; there is a constant coming and going of new characters as well as the continual movement of props on and off stage, as occurs in *Lysistrata* and *Acharnians* for example<sup>2</sup>. The comic stage is a busy place; Aristophanes' role as orchestrator of this space puts one in mind of a magician using "sleight of hand" tricks to draw an audience's attention over here, while over there preparing the next part of the act. Dazzling a comic audience does seem to be part of the comic craft<sup>3</sup>.

It is this mad, bedazzling world conjured up in each Aristophanic play that forms the backdrop for this article, which aims to look behind the mayhem and explore the freedom of character-movement in Aristophanic stage-space. More specifically, I present and discuss the following hypothesis concerning Aristophanic comic drama: the stage movement and presence of gods, heroes and mythical characters is strictly controlled in extant Aristophanic comedy, as is the manner in which human-divine contact is made. From this it follows that the space in which these characters appear and their movement within that space is limited in ways that reveal patterns in their stage-behaviour. Gods, heroes and mythical figures do not just turn up anywhere anyhow in comedy, and the question is why.

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<sup>1</sup> See recent discussions of artistic evidence by J.R. Green and of performance by E. Csapo in DOBROV (2010); on Greek vases and depictions of comedy see SCHMIDT (1998) and TAPLIN (1993). On ancient Greek music, see PÖHLMANN – WEST (2001). On comic costume see STONE (1981) and for an overview of the sources for ancient performance, see CSAPO – SLATER (1994). On studying ancient performance contexts for Aristophanic comedy see REVERMANN (2006), and a briefer discussion by RECKFORD (1987, 123-42), who emphasises the need to see a comic drama in performance.

<sup>2</sup> Ar. *Ach.* 1095-1142 in a scene between Lamachus and Dicaeopolis; Ar. *Lys.* 916-53 as Myrrhine avoids the sexual advances of her husband Cinesias.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. FEENEY (1993, 236) who discusses the ancient Greek concept of fiction as deception and seduction. This is reflected in the fragment of Gorgias which sees tragedy as deception: «the deceiver is more just than the non-deceiver and the deceived is wiser than the undeceived» (Gorgias B 23 DK). The art of deception, like the magic trick of a conjurer, is often a form of misdirection and clearly Gorgias' comment is equally applicable to comic drama. Polyb. II 56, 10-12 contrasts the function of history and tragedy, noting that the former is concerned with truth, the latter with persuasive speech that astounds and entertains its audience: ἐκεῖ μὲν γὰρ δεῖ διὰ τῶν πιθανωτάτων λόγων ἐκπληῖσαι καὶ ψυχαγωγῆσαι κατὰ τὸ παρὸν τοὺς ἀκούοντας. Aristophanic comedy forms an unusual hybrid of these views.

These points are significant and warrant both a demonstration of their viability as well as explanation. Indeed, the significance of the patterned movement of these comic characters is two-fold; firstly, it offers a way of exploring the stagecraft of Aristophanic comedy which, as illustrated at the start of the article, makes every effort to disguise itself under a veneer of madcap action. As such, this article builds on the work of Nick Lowe who has already argued that: «the mapping of space in Aristophanic comedy is not anarchic or incoherent»<sup>4</sup>. Secondly, these comedies are set in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, often in Athens itself, and so they present a way of approaching the complex issue of human-divine interaction in 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE Athens; how it was perceived, imagined and even enacted. This last point is something that Aristophanes dealt with, consciously or not, when he chose to bring divine characters on stage in the first place. For one of the most important effects achieved in Aristophanic comedy, as with tragedy, is that the play's action is believable to an audience and that it flows<sup>5</sup>. The surprise is that the plays of Aristophanes are totally or partly set in the city of Athens in 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, and so it is into this comic contemporary world that the divine characters must move. Therefore the issues of examining Aristophanic stagecraft and dealing with the divine and mythical within that stagecraft are interlinked. This relationship is clearly expressed in the question that lies at the heart of this discussion: How do you deal with gods, heroes and mythical figures in comic space?

### *Contexts*

An audience-centred approach to this issue leads to the consideration of what it must have been like for 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE audiences of Aristophanic comedy to see gods, heroes and mythical characters on-stage. In attempting to answer this question we must both approach comedy as the live-performance genre stated above, and place it in its context as a dramatic performance at a religious festival where the lives of participants were built around forms of interaction with gods, heroes and myths. As Easterling points out, Greek drama shows no sign of «anxiety or unease» about portraying gods on-stage and she attributes this to the use in theatre of a mask<sup>6</sup>. The mask is no doubt part of the answer, but this explanation is insufficient to explain the different stage-behaviour of

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<sup>4</sup> LOWE (2006, 48).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. LADA-RICHARDS (2002, 75f.) who emphasises the importance of the dramatist in shaping his material, especially, she notes, in Old Comedy which is not bound by mythical plots. On drama in general she states: «provided the dramatist does not warp beyond recognition the figures he inherits from the legends, it is *expected* that he will create fictitious, yet plausible, situations, which his actors will be obliged to sustain throughout the performance».

<sup>6</sup> EASTERLING (1993, 78).

gods in tragedy and comedy (a point which will emerge from this paper). Unfortunately, scholars have frequently chosen to separate the study of gods in the two forms of drama with a greater focus on tragedy<sup>7</sup>.

The distinctive settings of comedies and tragedies go some way to explaining the different stage-behaviour of gods; tragedies are always set in a past time, often a mythical past, though sometimes describing characters and events of the recent past<sup>8</sup>. Sourvinou-Inwood sees this distancing of the world of the play from that of its audience as defining the audience's relationship to tragedy<sup>9</sup>, but what about the relationship between Aristophanic comedy and its audience? Aristophanes' extant plays are not set in the past (the 'distancing' is zero) and yet mythical and divine figures appear alongside contemporary mortals. How could Athenians take their gods and the plays seriously, and could they do so simultaneously?

Comedy has attracted some attention from the study of Greek religion, e.g. the work of Brelich and Corsini<sup>10</sup>, but it has received short shrift from others, including Parker who discusses tragedy and religion briefly in chapter 7 of his book *Polytheism and Society at Athens*, but to comedy and religion he gives, as he acknowledges, only «some glancing attention»<sup>11</sup>. This is but a small step on from Mikalson's more extreme position which uses Aristophanes as a source «only to illuminate religious belief and attitudes established by more reliable evidence»<sup>12</sup>. It is the view of this article that a source situated in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE which formed part of a public performance to the peoples of that time, and which was composed with the intention of being viewed by a contemporary public, has a lot to tell us about religious beliefs and attitudes.

Therefore, before moving to the comedies themselves it is necessary to consider the general picture of what a 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE Athenian citizen's experience of the gods and heroes in his city was like since these individuals form the collective audiences at dramatic festivals. This is of course a huge task which can only be tackled in brief here. Sourvinou-Inwood's affirmation that central to the ancients was the «notion of the ultimate unknowability of the transcendental» indicates the complexity of human-divine relationships<sup>13</sup>. Nonetheless, the engagement of Athenians with their gods takes many

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<sup>7</sup> The gods in tragedy is a topic for both EASTERLING (1993) and for SOURVINOU-INWOOD (1997; 2003, 459-511).

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Aesch. *Pers.*, Phrynichus' *Sack of Miletus*.

<sup>9</sup> SOURVINOU-INWOOD (2003, 19).

<sup>10</sup> BRELICH (1969, 21-30) on Aristophanic comedy; BRELICH (1985) on the relationship between Greeks and their gods. CORSINI (1986 and 1993) argues that Aristophanes' attitude to traditional religion is consistently negative: «il suo atteggiamento nei riguardi di questa rimane coerentemente negativo dall'inizio alla fine della sua produzione» (CORSINI [1993, 86]). This is not a position supported by this article.

<sup>11</sup> PARKER (2005, 136).

<sup>12</sup> MIKALSON (1983, 10).

<sup>13</sup> SOURVINOU-INWOOD (1997, 185 and earlier expressed on p. 162).

forms and fills all aspects of their lives<sup>14</sup>. These points of contact include: festivals, sacrifices, offerings<sup>15</sup>, rites of passage, mystery cults, oracles and augury, curses, dance and athletic displays, dramatic and other forms of performance contests, temples, sanctuaries, shrines, hero cults<sup>16</sup>, household gods (Hestia, Zeus Ktēsios, Zeus Herkeios, Apollo Agyieus, Hekateion, Herms)<sup>17</sup> and ancestral gods (πατροῦοι θεοί). The Athenian agora is one example of an Athenian space which, as well as being an administrative centre, contained the Altar of the Twelve Gods from where distances were measured, «making it a symbolic centre for the whole of Attica» as Parker puts it<sup>18</sup>. In addition the agora held the Monument of the Eponymous Heroes, Herms, hero shrines and a stoa of Zeus Eleuthērios<sup>19</sup>.

Therefore, there is not a part of Athenian life that gods and heroes did not permeate. They are omnipresent and yet they are visible only as non-moving images, as statues<sup>20</sup>, or on relief sculptures, wall-paintings, and on pottery. In scenic depictions it is notable that gods are frequently pictured coming into contact with mortals (non-mythical) but these are static representations<sup>21</sup>. There is one arena where these divinities

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<sup>14</sup> Both MIKALSON (2005) and PARKER (2005) discuss ancient Greek and Athenian religion respectively by dividing it into areas of interaction between gods and mortals, e.g. family, state, or an individual's relation with a god. In contrast, HUMPHREYS (2004) offers a more focused account of the modern frame within which we approach Greek gods; he summarises the book as a combination of «analysis of sources with history of interpretative categories» (p. 4) and his is a more diachronic approach to the topic.

<sup>15</sup> Plat. *Leg.* 909e-910a comments on the high volume of offerings in temples in part due to people's fear of the gods in dreams and apparitions which encourages individuals to make more dedications.

<sup>16</sup> Demes often had eponymous or founding heroes (*arkhēgetēs*), e.g. the deme of Anagyrous which features in Aristoph. *Anagyris*; Soph. *OC* 458 makes reference to deme-holding gods, δημοῦρχοι at Athens.

<sup>17</sup> See PARKER (2005, 19) for a revealing comment about his conception of the nature of an Athenian's relation with household gods, which are represented by objects rather than in anthropomorphic form: «one elegant explanation is that it was precisely because these gods lived near to men that their otherness needed to be stressed».

<sup>18</sup> PARKER (2005, 55). Cf. the oath common in comedy sworn to these gods, e.g. Ar. *Eq.* 235, Paphlagon: «by the Twelve gods!».

<sup>19</sup> CAMP (2001, 257-60) provides a recent discussion of the material culture of the agora.

<sup>20</sup> Epicharmus fr. 129 contains a Greek proverb that any log can be made into a pillar or a god. Plat. *Leg.* 930e-931a: «the ancient laws of all men concerning the gods are two-fold: some of the gods whom we honour we see clearly, but of others we set up statues as images, and we believe that when we worship these, lifeless though they be, the living gods beyond feel great good-will towards us and gratitude» – translation by BURY (1926, 447). Cf. Ar. *Eq.* 30-35 where the slave Nicias suggests bowing before a statue of the god to escape their troubles, to which Demosthenes replies: «do you think the gods are real then?» Nicias answers that they must be, because they clearly hate him. The exchange ends in a joke, but it hints at the complex relationship that an Athenian had with both a divinity and its statue.

<sup>21</sup> VAN STRATEN (1995, *passim*) discusses depictions on vases of gods receiving sacrifice in front of mortals dating from 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE (Athena, Dionysus, the Eleusinian gods and Apollo; see pp. 14-21 with Figures). Van Straten separates these from «mythical sacrifices» (pp. 30, 40-43). For his analysis of votive reliefs see VAN STRATEN (1995, 58-100 and Figures). PARKER (2005, 37-39) also discusses this type of votive relief (pp. 45-49 provides an inventory) which depicts groups of individuals, (including women, men and children) approaching a god. A large group of these have been found dedicated to Asclepius in

come to life right before an Athenian's eyes and that is the world of drama and performance. Tragic plays and comic alike would bring gods onto the stage. Beneath the mask is an actor but on the surface it is a god, and for the comic or dramatic power of these plays to work the audience-members are invited to believe that, within the fictional world of the stage, they are really seeing these gods.

In the case of mythical figures in comedy, a distinction needs to be made between the use of actual mythical characters (such as Tereus in *Birds*) and of human characters who are only dressed up as, and playing the part of, mythical or tragic characters. This occurs extensively in Ar. *Thesmophoriazusae* and in *Acharnians*, and is discussed in more detail below. Alongside this definition of mythical figures we can add a similar one for gods and heroes, namely that gods in comedy are counted as those whose identity as a divinity is never called into question, i.e. their fictional identity in the play remains constant. There are two characters whose divine status is disputed in the actual comedies and who therefore are not considered in this paper: Amphitheus in *Acharnians* (*Ach.* 45-58) and the Cloud-chorus of *Clouds*. The former is, in fact, not to be seen as a god at all; Amphitheus is both a name that provides a joke at his expense (ὄγκ ἄνθρωπος;<sup>22</sup>) and a character whose false-god status is revealed firstly in his need to give his own genealogy, which is in itself quite complicated, and secondly in the fact that this genealogy does not occur in any other sources:

**Amphitheus gives this genealogy:**

Demeter – Triptolemus  
|  
Amphitheus  
|  
Celeus – Phaenarete  
|  
Lycinus  
|  
Amphitheus (ὄγκ ἄνθρωπος) of *Acharnians*

**The standard genealogy<sup>23</sup>:**

Celeus  
|  
Triptolemus

In comparison, the Cloud-chorus of *Clouds* also has its identity questioned by the comic protagonist, Strepsiades as it arrives on-stage. At Ar. *Nub.* 316 Socrates had introduced the Clouds as μεγάλαι θεαί, but once Strepsiades spots the Clouds (at Ar. *Nub.* 326) he

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the Athenian Asclepion, and to Artemis in Brauron and another group by the River Ilissus in a sanctuary of Pancrates/Heracles 350-250 BCE. VIKELA (1994, 53) suggests that the start-date marks the rise of the cult, but PARKER (2005, 419) notes that this could merely herald an earlier clear out of older relief sculptures.

<sup>22</sup> GRIFFITH (1974, 368) who discusses the joke in this scene and the use of 'Anthropos' as a personal name.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *H.Dem.* II 149-59; 473-79. SOMMERSTEIN (1980, 161) notes for Amphitheus: «divine on both sides [...] the names in this genealogy in part derive from Eleusinian mythology (but wildly confused) and in part are pure invention».

admits that he had not previously considered clouds to be goddesses (Ar. *Nub.* 329f.). Despite Socrates' explanation of their status Strepsiades still expresses his doubts (Ar. *Nub.* 340-44), noting that they look like *mortal* women (θηηταῑς εἴξασι γυναιξίν) with noses. The uncertain human-divine status of the Cloud-chorus disrupts the level of reality on which the audience might be expected to perceive it throughout the play. This therefore exposes the Clouds as stage-characters of questionable status (Aristophanes appears here to mock his own costuming)<sup>24</sup>.

### *Stage movement*

It is now time to turn to the other Aristophanic comedies beginning with some general observations: when divine and mythical characters appear in the eleven extant Aristophanic comedies they are in specially created, separate places outside of the city of Athens. They can even be brought into the city, but they are escorted by the comic hero. It is the comic hero who must initiate contact with a mythical or divine character (even when the protagonist is the god Dionysus in *Frogs* meeting Heracles). Once this has occurred, more divine or mythical characters can follow on-stage of their own accord. This pattern is observable in all of the extant Aristophanic comedies that contain gods:

<b>Play:</b>	<i>Peace</i>	<i>Birds</i>	<i>Frogs</i>	<i>Wealth</i>
<b>Comic Hero:</b>	Trygaeus	Peisetaerus	Dionysus	Chremylus
<b>Journey:</b>	journey to Olympus	journey into the sky	journey to the Underworld	journey to Delphi, Athens, Asclepion
<b>Gods, heroes and mythical figures in the play:</b>	Hermes, War, Mayhem, Peace*, Theōria, Opōra	Tereus, Procne, Iris, Prometheus, Poseidon, Heracles, Triballian, Basileia	Dionysus, Heracles, Plouton	Wealth, Poverty, Hermes

\* Peace is the only divinity depicted as a statue.

It is notable that the first three of these plays – *Peace*, *Birds*, and *Frogs* – have been grouped together before, for example in Hall and Wrigley's edited volume: *Aristophanes in Performance 421 BC-AD 2007: Peace, Birds and Frogs*. Hall labels these plays as «'distant quest' plays, those that provided staged journey of an 'upstairs' (anabatic) or

<sup>24</sup> DOVER (1968, lxx) notes this ambiguity in the Cloud-chorus: «they reveal themselves at the end (1454 ff.) as true deities, who have behaved towards Strepsiades as the gods in tragic legend behave».

'downstairs' (katabatic) nature»<sup>25</sup>. The narrative and dramatic structural similarities of these plays are evident and were also observed in antiquity by Lucian and Antonius Diogenes in the late 1<sup>st</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries, as E. Bowie's contribution to Hall – Wrigley's volume makes clear<sup>26</sup>. The underlying narrative pattern reveals a primary feature of these comic plays, namely that a meeting with a divinity requires a journey on the part of the main character or comic hero. It is now time to explore how this works in each of these four comedies before moving to some general observations.

### *Peace*

In Aristophanes' *Peace* Trygaeus, our comic hero, leaves Athens to confront Zeus about his treatment of the Greeks<sup>27</sup>. Upon arrival in the sky, Trygaeus does not in fact meet Zeus but rather the god Hermes<sup>28</sup>. Trygaeus journeys from Athens to the sky in an open parody of Euripides' tragic play *Bellerophon*<sup>29</sup>; whereas Bellerophon flew on the winged beast Pegasus, Trygaeus travels on an enormous dung beetle (only after, we are told, an attempt at reaching the gods with ladders had failed). Trygaeus even explains his reasons for using a beetle to ride to the sky using an Aesop's fable (Ar. *Pax* 129f.). There follows another tragic parody as Trygaeus' children beg him not to fly away, in a scene which mimics one from Euripides' play *Aeolus*<sup>30</sup>. Therefore, Trygaeus' meeting with Hermes has been prefigured by these mythical parodies. The bounds of comic reality were already being stretched at the very moment when Trygaeus' feet left the ground. By bringing in a scene containing parody, this allows an audience to interpret that scene on two levels of perception at once: that of hypotext (the source text) and the hypertext (the mimicking text). This therefore is one tactic for preparing an audience's perceptions to work on two planes of reality in one comedy: that of a distorted comic contemporary Athens but also one that can contain gods on-stage.

Once in the heavens, Trygaeus observes Polemos (War) and his side-kick Kudoimos (Mayhem) cooking up trouble for Athens. However, Trygaeus conceals

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<sup>25</sup> HALL – WRIGLEY (2007, 3).

<sup>26</sup> BOWIE (2007, 42) and see pp. 43-49 for a table of Aristophanes' influences on authors of this period.

<sup>27</sup> Ar. *Pax* 56-59: in the prologue scene the slave reports that Trygaeus spends all day looking at the sky and calling on Zeus not to «sweep away» Greece: μή 'κκόρει τὴν Ἑλλάδα.

<sup>28</sup> BOWIE (1993, 135) sees the behaviour of characters such as Trygaeus as hubristic towards the gods. The morals of the tragic universe are transplanted into the comic.

<sup>29</sup> OLSON (1998, xxxii-xxxviii) discusses the literary and mythological influences on the play. SOMMERSTEIN (1985, xvii) notes that *Peace* abounds «especially in the comic exploitation of many other genres of poetry».

<sup>30</sup> SOMMERSTEIN (1985, 140) considers all of Ar. *Pax* 114-23 to form a parody of Euripides' *Aeolus*. OLSON (1998, 90-92) does not view all these lines as parody of this tragedy, but he agrees on the extensive use of tragic diction, and this continues through Ar. *Pax* 124-49.

himself and never interacts with these destructive deities. After winning over Hermes, Trygaeus rescues Peace, buried in a cave with her attendants Opōra and Theōria (Harvest and Holiday). We can note that Trygaeus initiates the journey as well as the contact with the divine, and it is only once he has left the city that he meets with gods. He is, however, then able to conduct Peace and her attendants back to his home and reap the benefits<sup>31</sup>.

### *Birds*

A similar pattern is observable in Aristophanes' play *Birds* but with the marked absence of the main character making a return journey to Athens. Indeed, the premise of the play is that Peisetaerus (our comic hero) and Euelpides are intent on leaving the city of Athens behind. At the beginning of the play we find them travelling from Athens in order to locate the bird formerly known as Tereus. Peisetaerus has initiated the search and quickly meets Tereus on-stage (and later his wife Procne as well at Ar. Av. 665); mythological figures do not appear unannounced in Aristophanic comedy any more than gods do. The stage-presence of Tereus also provides the opportunity for parody of recent tragedies on Tereus, namely Sophocles' play<sup>32</sup>. It is only after their meeting with the two mythical characters of Tereus and Procne that Peisetaerus and Euelpides move on to found their new city Cloudcuckooland and gain their bird-costumes. These two ex-Athenians end up creating another city, an Athenian colony but also an alter-ego Athens with the help of the mythical Tereus and the birds, and this city is in the sky. Athenians then come seeking entry to the sky-city, but this new city in the clouds invites the same set of undesirable clientèle that caused all the problems in Athens. This new city is but a reflection of the old Athens, and it is to this newly defined space that the gods and heroes then approach.

The first divine visitor is the messenger Iris (Ar. Av. 1199) who is trying to reach mortals to instruct them to sacrifice to the gods. At Ar. Av. 1208-55 Peisetaerus tells Iris that her arrival in the city is illegal; she has not gained permission to enter, she has encroached on others' space, she is an unwelcome visitor and moreover an unwelcome divine character. Starting with Iris, Peisetaerus is now restricting the movement of the

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<sup>31</sup> This is in fact represented as the *return* of the goddess to Athens, rather than the introduction of a new divinity to the city, as Hermes makes clear in describing how the Athenians had earlier forced the goddess out of the city (Ar. *Pax* 637).

<sup>32</sup> On the dating of *Tereus* see SOMMERSTEIN – FITZPATRICK – TALBOY (2006, 157-59) and DOBROV (1993, 213). The only firm dating for Sophocles' *Tereus* is a *terminus ante quem* of *Birds* in 414 BCE. Eupolis, *Taxiarkhoi* fr. 268, 7-11 also mentions Sophocles' *Tereus* but the dating of *Taxiarkhoi* is disputed, possibly 410s BCE (see STOREY [2003, 246-48]). The 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE dramatist Cantharus wrote a comic play called *Tereus*, about which little is known.

gods. After a number of mortal visitors the hero Prometheus appears in the city (Ar. Av. 1494) and gives insider information as to how Peisetaerus can defeat Zeus. Finally an embassy of Heracles, Poseidon and the foreign god Triballian arrives and Peisetaerus is instated as overall ruler of the world.

This comedy has, as the table above indicates, the largest volume of gods, heroes and mythical characters in combination out of the extant Aristophanic plays. It is not an unconnected fact that scholars have repeatedly labelled the play as fantasy<sup>33</sup>, particularly as the stage-action begins with the main character moving away from the comic city (cf. *Frogs* which moves to the Underworld). However, in its control over the movement of divine and mythical stage characters *Birds* has much in common with *Peace*. In both plays the main character leaves the space of the comic city, of Athens, and travels into the sky. It is only in this separate space that divine characters appear and the episode is prefigured by scenes of mythical parody. In the case of *Birds*, the mythical Tereus can even appear and parody his representation in tragedy. In *Peace* Trygaeus and his family perform a close parody of Euripides' *Bellerophon* and *Aeolus* and evoke a relevant Aesop's fable that sets up the mythical context for the play. This mythical shell appears to set the tone for the type of drama the audience is to expect, and it is one that involves gods and mythical figures.

### *Frogs*

In contrast, Aristophanes' play *Frogs* does not contain this type of mythical shell, but its opening scene of Dionysus descending on a mission to the Underworld evokes numerous myths (involving similar journeys made by Heracles, Theseus and Orpheus). *Frogs* is the one extant play with a god, Dionysus, as the comic hero, and as the play begins Dionysus and Xanthias are already travelling to the Underworld, stopping at the house of Heracles along the way. The god Dionysus neither starts the play in the city of Athens nor does he meet Heracles there; but again, as in *Peace* and *Birds*, the comic hero (this time a god himself) is already on a journey with the purpose of meeting a divine and mythical character at the start of the play. After encountering Heracles, Dionysus moves out of the mortal world and into the Underworld which is the appropriate setting for him to meet Charon, Plouton, and the shades of Euripides, Sophocles and Aeschylus. This array of gods and ghosts in the comedy occurs outside

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<sup>33</sup> SOMMERSTEIN (1987, 2) «as fantasy *Birds* has no rival in what we possess of Greek literature, until we reach Lucian nearly six centuries later»; POZZI (1985-1986, 11) «the plot of this play -for Old Comedy unusually linear and straightforward- unfolds as a fantasy of power». For Pozzi, the Tereus and Procne myth provides pastoral-lyric motifs.

of the comic city with the suggestion that monsters will appear in the play but, as Sommerstein notes, it is possible that the fiends never appear on-stage<sup>34</sup>. This would be a suitable comic manipulation of the audience's expectations, but it remains possible that such characters did appear in the play since journeying to the Underworld provides the perfect setting for monsters in comedy.

### *Wealth*

Lastly we come to *Wealth*, a lesser studied Aristophanic comedy, but one filled with divine characters whose role is partly played offstage in a manner more reminiscent of tragedy. Whereas *Birds* was remarkable for the number of divine and mythical characters that it contained, *Wealth* is unique in that the comic hero depends on the help and co-operation of three separate deities (Apollo, Wealth and Asclepius) although only Wealth is an on-stage character<sup>35</sup>. *Wealth* is also the one Aristophanic play that involves a miracle caused by a god; the divine healing of Wealth in the Asclepion. It is notable that the healing is performed not on an Athenian or a even human but on the god Wealth and this occurs offstage. At the start of this play, as with *Peace*, *Birds* and *Frogs*, our hero – this time called Chremylus – is again travelling; he has just been to Delphi to ask Apollo if his son should behave like a criminal because virtue does not pay (Ar. *Pl.* 32-38). Apollo's answer, we are told, was that Chremylus should accompany the first man he saw upon leaving the oracle (Ar. *Pl.* 40-43). Therefore, when the play opens Chremylus is accompanying a blind old man, who is not immediately identified, but is then revealed as the blind god Wealth (Ar. *Pl.* 78). Chremylus conducts Wealth on a number of journeys: firstly into his house<sup>36</sup>, then offstage to Asclepius' sanctuary where Wealth has his sight restored. This second journey is interrupted by the surprise appearance of the goddess Poverty, and an *agon* ensues. Once Wealth's sight is restored, he returns to the house of Chremylus<sup>37</sup>, but at the very end of the play he is escorted to be installed on the Acropolis (Ar. *Pl.* 1191-93). There is much more movement of the divine character in this play compared with the other three plays discussed above. However, we still see that the comic hero initiates contact with Wealth and then guides

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<sup>34</sup> SOMMERSTEIN (2009, 170 and chapter 7 *passim*).

<sup>35</sup> This article views Wealth as a god, not as an allegorical character, on which see NEWIGER (1957).

<sup>36</sup> MEDDA (2005) notes that in this scene (lines 124-221) there is a reversal of roles between mortal and god.

<sup>37</sup> Wealth praises Athens «who has taken me in» (Ar. *Pl.* 773) and then enters the house of Chremylus. Wealth's divine status is then assured by the entrance of a character wishing to dedicate offerings to the god.

the god before installing him in Athens, as occurred in *Peace* which is another play where an Athenian character brings a god into the city.

Once the all-seeing Wealth is installed in Chremylus' house, there is a surprise visit from a grovelling, starving Hermes who appears at Chremylus' door at the end of the play (Ar. *Pl.* 1100). At first he announces threats from Zeus but then quickly he switches allegiance to Wealth and is allowed into Chremylus' house. Hermes came to the house uninvited because of starvation and this scene occurs only after Chremylus has already accompanied Wealth willingly into his house. In both *Peace* and *Wealth* Hermes is won over to the human cause; he allows Trygaeus to rescue Peace against the explicit wishes of Zeus, and in *Wealth* he abandons the service of Zeus in favour of working in Chremylus' kitchen cleaning offal. We see that in *Peace*, *Birds* and *Wealth* the comic protagonist succeeds in replacing the rule of Zeus only with divine help (of Peace, Prometheus and Wealth respectively). In *Peace* and *Wealth* this help is manifested on-stage by the physical movement of the divine helper as they are led by the comic protagonist into territory under his control.

There is one last scene from *Wealth* that deserves mention; it occurs right at the end of the play as the priest of Zeus Sōter arrives at Chremylus' door and expresses his wish to change allegiance to Wealth (Ar. *Pl.* 1186f.). Chremylus tells the priest not to worry as Zeus Sōter is already present and has come of his own accord: ὁ Ζεὺς ὁ σωτήρ γὰρ πάρεστιν ἐνθάδε, αὐτόματος ἦκων (Ar. *Pl.* 1189f.). Although Zeus Sōter never appears on-stage it is worth considering what these lines mean in terms of divine movement in comedy. Sommerstein is right to reject Olson's suggestion that Zeus Sōter is used as a synonym for Wealth, however Olson's view that «Aristophanic gods do not magically appear somewhere» is supported by the discussion above<sup>38</sup>. There is no need for lines 1189f. to mean that Zeus has surrendered to Chremylus and is actually in the house, as Sommerstein suggests<sup>39</sup>. It is, perhaps, rather a way of saying that Wealth has been victorious and in this sense Zeus Sōter as a divine force is with Chremylus in his house.

### *Observations*

It is apparent that Aristophanes chose not to pretend that mythical, divine or heroic characters lived in his comic Athens. Once found outside the city such figures could be brought back to it, but they were not a part of the everyday Athenian world that

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<sup>38</sup> SOMMERSTEIN (2001, 214f.) also quotes this line from OLSON (1990).

<sup>39</sup> SOMMERSTEIN (2001, 215). Indeed, the parallel Sommerstein offers for this occurrence comes from satyr drama, and the treatment of gods in comedy compared to other dramatic genres is clearly distinct.

Aristophanes created. In the case of divine characters this invitation and escorting of the gods, and guiding them into mortal space, is reminiscent of many Attic festival processions, e.g. at the City Dionysia a statue of the god was escorted to the city passing through the agora where a chorus danced before the Altar of the Twelve Gods<sup>40</sup>. At the Plyntēria ephebes escort Pallas to the sea<sup>41</sup>. The pattern of introducing a god into Athens by escorting their statue is one that even tragedy could choose to imitate, for example in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Tauris*<sup>42</sup>. There are also three intriguing fragments of black *skyphoi* (two dated to c. 500 BCE) portraying Dionysus in a wheeled ship-cart alongside satyrs playing *auloi* and followed by human figures leading a sacrificial bull<sup>43</sup>. At the Oschophoria there was a procession (from the sanctuary of Dionysus to the temple of Athena Sciras) of two Athenian youths dressed as women and carry vine branches, as Theseus did to thank Athena and Dionysus for his return from Crete, leading a chorus singing Oschophoria songs<sup>44</sup>.

In the case of Asclepius, whose role in *Wealth* as healer of the blind god Wealth was central to the plot, we even have the so-called Telemachus Monument (*IG II<sup>2</sup> 4960a*) which records the introduction of the cult of Asclepius into Attica. The text is particularly difficult but Garland's translation provides a starting point:

when he [i.e. the god] came up from Zea on the occasion of the Great Mysteries he was conveyed to the El[eusinio]n and having [summoned] his sn[ake] from its home (or from his house) he brought it hither in Telemachos' [chariot]. At the same time Hyg[ieia] arrived, and in this way the whole [sanctuary (hieron)] was established [during the archonship of Astyphilos of Kydantidai (420/19)] [...]<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Xen. *Hipparch.* III 2 and a separate procession leading at least one hundred bulls to the sanctuary of Dionysus for sacrifice.

<sup>41</sup> See PARKER (2005, 478). Cf. at the Panathenaea the robe of Pallas Athena was taken to the Acropolis with an escort from all sections of society in Athens from the Outer Kerameikos (at the edge of the city) through the agora to the Acropolis.

<sup>42</sup> Eur. *IT* 977-86 Orestes explains Apollo's prophecy that he can escape madness by stealing a statue of Artemis that fell from the sky and then taking it back to Athens and setting it up in the city.

<sup>43</sup> VAN STRATEN (1995, 18f. and figg. 10f.) discusses these pieces and notes the curious fact that the god appears in his own procession. Van Straten offers two explanations: either the god and satyrs are humans in costume – there is no evidence for this in the drawing – or «the vase painter has taken the liberty of visualizing the invisible divine presence». These attempts to explain the scene indicate that van Straten is uncomfortable with this merging of gods with humans, and yet there is no such discussion for depictions of Athena and Apollo. PARKER (2005, 302) supports the view that the procession might have been part of the Anthesteria. See the start of Hermippus, *Phormophoroi* (*Porters*) fr. 63 for a mention of Dionysus as provider of Athenian imports by sea at the beginning of an epic-style catalogue, complete with invocation of the Muses: ἔσπετε νῦν μοι, Μοῦσαι Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχουσαι, / ἐξ οὗ ναυκληρεῖ Διόνυσος ἐπ' οἴνοπα πόντον... (Athen. *Deip.* Epitome I 27d-e).

<sup>44</sup> CSAPO (1997, 263) discusses the Oschophoria.

<sup>45</sup> GARLAND (1992, 118) who discusses Asclepius' introduction into Attica (pp. 116-35).

The problems with the text are discussed by Aston who notes that «the most one can say with any confidence is that the Telemachus monument reinforces the impression that the motif of arrival was extremely important in the dissemination of Asclepius' cult»<sup>46</sup>. In the discussion of *Wealth* above we noted the unparalleled level of stage movement that the god Wealth undergoes compared with gods in the other extant Aristophanic comedies. It is possible therefore to trace a parallel between the treatment of the introduction of Asclepius' cult into Athens in the late 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE and the manner in which Aristophanes chose to present the introduction of another god, Wealth, into Athens in a comedy of 388 BCE as he had with *Peace* in 421 BCE.

Therefore, Aristophanes is at pains to preserve a sense of realism in his plays even amidst the strangest of stage characters (from a flying, horse-sized dung beetle to a talking dog and a cheese-grater acting as a trial witness). The behaviour of gods in comic space mimics that with which Athenians are already familiar; festival processions. The parallels that A.M. Bowie draws between *Peace* and the Anthesteria can also be understood in this way<sup>47</sup>. In addition, Dionysus' journey to Hades and many elements in *Frogs* have long been linked to Mystery cults, both Eleusinian and Orphic<sup>48</sup>. Similarly, the connection of particular gods to geographic locations indicates a crucial point in human-divine relations and as Parker notes: «Greeks bring out the individuality of a local pantheon, in their own way, by the connection that they often draw between gods and territory. Particular gods 'hold' or 'have as their portion' particular territories»<sup>49</sup>. However, the behaviour of mortal-divine interaction in the four comedies explored above indicates that the role of the mortal is paramount in the god securing territory and then a place in the city. Indeed, Herodotus tells of Peisistratus regaining power by travelling into Athens in a chariot with a woman dressed as the goddess Athena<sup>50</sup>. Peisistratus is the orchestrator of events and he wins control of the city; it was not only comic poets who knew how to put on a performance.

In the Aristophanic comic world divine characters do not just appear in Athens; they have to be introduced. This is, I would argue, a purposeful part of Aristophanic stagecraft which aims at removing any jarring effect for an audience watching a comedy that is set in his own times but in which gods and mythical figures appear. This rule need not hold for other comic poets and, given that their plays are fragmentary, it will be difficult if not impossible to prove either way. At the very least we can accept that the

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<sup>46</sup> ASTON (2004, 21).

<sup>47</sup> BOWIE (1993, 146-50) compares the marriage in the Anthesteria between the wife of the *Arkhōn Basileus* to Dionysus and that of Trygaeus and Opōra in *Peace*. *Birds* also ends with Peisetaerus' marriage to Basileia.

<sup>48</sup> SUAREZ DE LA TORRE (1997); LADA-RICHARDS (1999); EDMONDS (2004); BERNABE (2008).

<sup>49</sup> PARKER (2005, 2), citing Dem. XIX 257, 267; Aeschin. II 23.

<sup>50</sup> Her. 1.60; Aristot. *Ath. Pol.* XIV 4.

patterns in the four extant plays discussed above point to a certain type of Aristophanic comedy. It is, however, clear that Aristophanes could be very careful in how he introduced mythical characters of the collective imagination onto the stage, including divine characters from beyond the mortal, visible world. It also shows that in comedy the relationship of an Athenian with the divine was perceived very much as a two-way partnership. The god could control human action, human life, death and liberty, but the human could impact upon the divine sphere of influence. Only a god or hero that was welcome in the city was honoured.

*The other extant Aristophanic comedies*

It is notable that the other extant Aristophanic comedies, *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Clouds*, *Wasps*, *Lysistrata*, *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Ecclesiazusae*, are all situated firmly on Athenian soil, but there is no movement outside of Athens and there is no such divine involvement nor does a mythical figure appear in any of these plays. If we compare *Ecclesiazusae* and *Wealth* in these terms it is clear that both deal with issues of poverty and sharing wealth out to all Athenians, but in *Ecclesiazusae* the problem for the city is framed in terms of what the city has done to itself. By contrast in *Wealth*, as in *Peace*, the blame is put on the gods.

*Thesmophoriazusae* is filled with extended parodies of Euripidean tragedies, and *Acharnians* also contains extended parody of Euripidean tragic scenes, but in both of these plays the level of reality of these scenes is made explicit by on-stage comic scenes of costume change. In *Acharnians* Euripides even grudgingly supervises the choice of costume for Dicaeopolis. The audience and Euripides observe a comic mortal character putting on a tragic costume and thereby taking on certain qualities of that character and their narrative world. However, the audience are left in no doubt that it is only comic characters acting as tragic ones; the Euripidean Telephus does not appear on-stage but rather it is someone mimicking that character. There is never any sense that they actually fully *become* a Telephus, Helen, or Andromeda. Instead, it is notable that Aristophanes uses such clear visual triggers, such as costume change, so that his audience know what level of comic reality they are engaging with. Here we should also recall the earlier discussion of how Aristophanes highlights the questionable status of the Cloud-chorus of *Clouds* and Amphitheus in *Acharnians*.

*Peace and the statue mocked*

We have reached the point of understanding that Aristophanes needed to present in his human-divine scenes something that would convince an Athenian of the plausibility of such a scene within a play. I have suggested that this is revealed by the way that the movement of gods is managed in comic space so that it recalls other religious activity performed by Athenians, in addition to the use of mythical and tragic parodies to prepare an audience for the presence of gods. It is worth briefly considering whether sometimes a comic poet could get the balance of fiction-reality wrong, even the mighty Aristophanes, if we are to believe the mockery of his rivals in comic drama. When discussing his play *Peace* earlier, I made little mention of the fact that the goddess Peace which Trygaeus rescues from a cave was in fact a statue, rather than an animate character performed by an actor. An ancient source records that the comic poets Platon and Eupolis both mocked Aristophanes in relation to this:

Eupolis, *Autolykos* fr. 62 and Plato, *Nikai* fr. 86:  
(*schol.* Areth. (B) Pl. *Ap.* 19c):

κωμωδεῖται δὲ καὶ ὅτι τὸ τῆς εἰρήνης  
κολοσσικὸν ἐξῆρεν ἄγαλμα. Εὐπολις  
Αὐτολύκῳ Πλάτων Νίκαις.

Aristophanes is mocked because he  
set up a statue<sup>51</sup> of Peace – Eupolis  
in his *Autolykos*, Platon in his *Nikai*.

How the movement of this stage-prop worked is still disputed by scholars, as is the meaning of κολοσσικὸν which is taken here as referring to ἄγαλμα («statue»)<sup>52</sup>. The point of the joke appears to be that giving a statue of a god a part in a play, and treating it as animate, was seen as more ridiculous than having a moving, talking god in front of an audience, in a play with Athenian characters. The use of the statue of a god in this way was mocked, paradoxically, because it was seen as unrealistic. This is despite the fact that images of gods were a fundamental part of many festival processions (where you would not expect it to spring into life). Perhaps in this case, Aristophanes misjudged his audience and their powers of imagination. It is worth stating that at this time Platon, Eupolis and Aristophanes were involved in a war of words that could be as

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 416 (lyric) where κολοσσός just means statue.

<sup>52</sup> OLSON (1998, xliii-xliv); PIRROTTA (2009, 193f.).

much a stage construction as the rest of their comedies and so it is hard to judge the seriousness of the criticism made by Platon and Eupolis<sup>53</sup>.

### *Aristophanic Fragments*

Observations so far have been based on the eleven extant Aristophanic comedies, but there are nearly one thousand fragments from around thirty lost plays by Aristophanes. However, given the approach of this article to studying the movement of gods, heroes and mythical characters throughout a play there are clear methodological problems associated with analysing character movement in fragments. This is mainly because in the majority of cases it is impossible to ascertain: (1) the overall scene from the fragment, (2) its place in the comedy, (3) the speaker and (4) the fragment's relation to the rest of the play. In some cases all of these problems (and more) merge into one.

The problems associated with such a study have already been faced by A.M. Bowie in his survey of all mythologically-titled comic plays. He notes that «some fifty plays appear to have involved substantial activity by the gods»<sup>54</sup>. There are also many intriguing titles of Aristophanic comedies that involve mythological figures<sup>55</sup>. They are often labelled mythological burlesque – a most unsatisfying tag due to its vagueness; the manner in which the myth was integrated into such a comic play is beyond our comprehension, as Bowie himself notes: «the most striking feature of the myth appears to have been preserved in some form in the comedy, but the fragments do not permit us to see how Aristophanes dealt with it»<sup>56</sup>. This article is not the place to tackle the many fragments and their possible applications. However, there is one fragmentary Aristophanic comedy, *Horae* (*Seasons*), that has a particular bearing on our earlier discussion.

Aristophanes' *Horae* has a *testimonium* provided by Cicero who notes that the comedy involved a trial and the expulsion of unwelcome foreign gods from the city<sup>57</sup>. This plot suggests that it involved the reverse act of what we have already observed in

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<sup>53</sup> PIRROTTA (2009, 27-32); STOREY (2003, 278-303).

<sup>54</sup> BOWIE (2000, 319).

<sup>55</sup> E.g. *Aiolosikon* I & II, *Danaiides*, *Lemniae*, *Polyidus* and *Phoenissae*.

<sup>56</sup> BOWIE (2000, 317f.). On p. 322 Bowie admits that mythological comedy is not «an unproblematic concept» and that it is not possible to categorise the type of use of mythology from the fragments.

<sup>57</sup> See KASSEL – AUSTIN (1984, 296) and HENDERSON (2007, 377-83). Cic. *Leg.* II 37 (*testimonium*): *novos vero deos et in his colendis nocturnas pervigilationes sic Aristophanes, facetissimus poeta veteris comoediae, vexat, ut apud eum Sabazius et quidam alii dei peregrini iudicati e civitate eiciantur.* «Thus Ar., the very witty poet of old comedy, attacked new gods and the nocturnal vigils that accompanied their worship, so that in his play Sabazius and certain other immigrant gods are expelled from the city after a trial» (transl. HENDERSON [2007, 377]).

the extant Aristophanic comedies *Peace* and *Wealth*. Certainly the god Sabazius is mentioned in Aristoph. *Horae* fr. 578 (τὸν Φρύγα, τὸν ἀύλητῆρα, τὸν Σαβάζιον), but it in no way indicates that he appeared on stage (cf. Asclepius and Apollo who never appear on-stage in *Wealth*). It is not clear from any of the fragments if the play actually involved on-stage appearances by gods, foreign or otherwise, but it is a possibility in Aristoph. *Horae* fr. 581. In this fragment of fifteen lines there appears to be two speakers although the attribution of lines is uncertain. One speaker appears to be offering a life of plenty to mortals, regardless of the time of year, which the other rejects. The first speaker therefore could be one of the Seasons personified. Henderson thinks Athena is the first speaker but there appears to be no strong reason for this, other than the fact that the characters are discussing Athens<sup>58</sup>.

### *Gods in tragedy*

Now that we have considered how Aristophanic comedy shaped and controlled the movement of gods, it is worth returning to scholarship on gods and tragedy to see how this might relate to our discussion of comedy. Sourvinou-Inwood rightly rejects Mikalson's idea that the gods of tragedy were literary constructs<sup>59</sup>. However, when Sourvinou-Inwood turns briefly to comedy she applies a similar approach to Mikalson's, noting that: «the gods in comedy were comic constructs, a perception constantly reinforced through the metatheatricality of the genre which drew continuous attention to its nature as comic performance»<sup>60</sup>. The discussion above, concerning the controlled stage-movement of gods, suggests that there is more at play here than highlighting the metatheatricality of comedy. The gods are more than “comic constructs” *because* they are tools of dramatic persuasion and as such, in the setting of Old Comedy, set in 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE contemporary Athens, the dramatist needs to pull on that reality to make his comic distortion believable and persuasive to an audience, all of whom had one form of relationship or another with gods and heroes in Athens. In this sense then, comic gods are comic constructs but only to the degree that tragic gods are tragic constructs, formed to suit the roles required of them in a way that is persuasive to the audience. As Feeney puts it: «knowing what (or how) *not* to believe is as integral a part of the experience as knowing what (or how) to believe – otherwise everything collapses»<sup>61</sup>. Seeking the

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<sup>58</sup> HENDERSON (2007, 377-79 n. 132).

<sup>59</sup> SOURVINOU-INWOOD (1997, 170-86); MIKALSON (1991, 4f.) «the gods of poetry are, I would claim, the products of literary fantasy and genius, not of the Greek religious spirit». A view that this paper very much refutes.

<sup>60</sup> SOURVINOU-INWOOD (1997, 182).

<sup>61</sup> FEENEY (1993, 237).

margins between belief and disbelief, between one genre and the next becomes the site at which to observe the fervent creativity and power of dramatic art.

The idea that gods in tragedy can be seen as tragic constructs is something that Easterling explores in tragedy's use of the *mēkhanē* to winch in divine assistance. Easterling views this as «one of the clearest ways in which a dramatist can indicate to an audience that two different levels of reality are being juxtaposed for their benefit»<sup>62</sup>. As another example Easterling cites instances where gods provide a divine frame to the narrative of the drama whereby they attain the role of «god as *didaskalos*»<sup>63</sup>. This is particularly evident in divine prologues (e.g. Athena in Sophocles' *Aias*; Poseidon and Athena in Euripides' *Troades*) and in divine framing (e.g. Aphrodite and Artemis in Euripides' *Hippolytus*; Hermes and Athena in Euripides' *Ion*). During such scenes the audience are put on the same plane as the divinities to a degree that they view the play from the same position as the divine for part of the drama. Both the *mēkhanē* and divine prologue show how tragedy can position its gods very carefully both in relation to its stage characters and to its audience. We have observed a different type of movement of gods in Aristophanic comedy where it is rather the comic hero who acts as *didaskalos* and there is more of a distancing of the audience from the divine; mortals have to travel away from civilisation to locate gods and mythical figures. The only god in Aristophanic comedy who has this dual role of *didaskalos*-comic hero is Dionysus, which is clearly appropriate, given that comic plays were performed at his festivals<sup>64</sup>.

### *Conclusion*

The study of the movement of gods, heroes and mythical figures in Aristophanic comic space has yielded an array of questions that require addressing, and it is clear that there are areas that deserve further consideration. In particular, there is a need to explore the changing face of gods in comedy through all the comic fragments. Menander's fusion of comic and tragic methods and his later date should reveal interesting changes in the stage behaviour of gods and mythical characters. Perhaps studying these changes can provide a way to explore developments in Greek and Athenian attitudes towards themselves and their gods. There is also a need for closer analysis of how the material evidence sits alongside that in dramatic performance in terms of visualising human-divine interaction. This article has also invited comparison of the dramatic roles and structuring of gods in comedy and tragedy but has only touched on these issues.

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<sup>62</sup> EASTERLING (1993, 85).

<sup>63</sup> EASTERLING (1993, 80).

<sup>64</sup> Dionysus repeats the equivalent role for tragedy in Euripides' *Bacchae*.

Last, but by no means least, there remains the topic of mortal women and their relationship with gods. *Ecclesiazusae* *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Lysistrata* are plays in which female characters dominate stage and speech and yet these plays contain no mythical or divine characters at all. What does this tell us about perceptions of female-god relationships? In myth a god or goddess interacts with a woman for two reasons: sexual desire, or jealousy. A god's appearance to a woman in mythology is nearly always a violent one; the boasts of a Niobe or Arachne end in death or transformation while Danaë or Europa is pursued by a sexually rampant Zeus.

In Aristophanic comedy we have seen that the manner in which mortal characters interact with the divine is carefully managed. Gods, heroes and mythical characters do not turn up in comedy unannounced, and it takes the actions of the comic protagonist, mortal or divine, to invoke the first appearance of a divinity or mythical character on-stage. This is often done amidst a mixture of mythical and tragic parody that sets the scene for appearances by these characters. The movement of divine characters is seen to mimic the movement of real Athenians taking part in religious activities because, even on a comic stage, the gods have to be believable.

Plato (*Leg.* 887d-e) remarks that children learn to believe in gods through hearing stories and by watching their parents pray and sacrifice to the gods. The parents perform an act in which the children are invited to participate by acknowledging the reality of the gods. The relationship between drama and audience can also be conceived along these lines. In fact, one could say, in reference to comic drama, that it is the act of performance itself that makes the appearance of gods on-stage acceptable to Athenians.

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