The Gods as Gags: Aristophanic Irony and Oaths in the *Clouds*

While much attention has been given to the depiction of Socrates' character and sacrilege towards the gods in the *Clouds*, there has been little treatment of how gods are used in the oaths of the other characters in that same play. I argue that Aristophanes' use of ironic humor in the oaths of his Athenian 'everyman' characters points to a reading of the text in which Socrates and the Sophists are not the only ones rebuked, but also the general population of Athens which had created an environment that allowed the sophists to flourish. I examine how the underlying ironic humor that frequently accompanies characters' oaths in the *Clouds* contributes to a larger theme of sacrilege and foreshadows the victory of the Weaker Speech over the Stronger Speech when the Stronger Speech looks out at the audience and discovers that "more than the majority [of the spectators] are gaping-assholes [i.e. lovers of sophistry]! I know that fellow over there is, that fellow there is too, and this one with the long hair" (*Clouds* 1097-1100; all translations are my own). The accusatory gesture does not merely single out a few members of the audience, but rather serves to implicate all the Athenians in attendance for creating a demand for sophistry and the questioning of traditional values.

The most fundamental of traditional values is the bond of an oath, especially the oath sworn to a god. Indeed, the oaths within the *Clouds* qualify as ironic precisely because they are sworn to the wrong god. For instance, when Strepsiades asks his son to obey him and stop racing horses, Pheidippides replies: "I will do what you say, by Poseidon" (*Clouds* 91). In this oath the son's deferment to his father is undercut by his oath to stop racing horses in the name of the patron god of horses. In an analogous instance, when Strepsiades is angry with his son, he swears: "Then indeed, by Demeter, neither you nor your lead horse nor your thoroughbred are eating [any] of my [food]" (*Clouds* 191). The father swears to starve his son and calls upon Demeter, goddess of agriculture, as a witness. I will argue that these examples and others are more than just punch lines, since they serve as subtle satire of the Athenians' attitudes toward their own traditions.

I draw upon K. J. Dover's discussion of cultural developments within Aristophanes' lifetime, specifically the "growth of a systematic interest in the techniques of persuasion in law courts and political assemblies" (1972: 110) which are addressed in the *Clouds*, to illustrate the willingness of the Athenian public to encourage sophists and cultural critics. However, I argue that this interest was more pervasive in Athenian society than the just the men "in the ranks of its wealthy aristocracy" (Dover 1972:113). After all, the reason that many orators were successful had as much to do with the physical gain the Athenian people received from their legislation as it did with the cleverness of their speeches. I also draw upon Matthew Dillon's study of oaths and invocations in Aristophanes' plays, but disagree with his assertion that the frequency of oaths in Aristophanes' plays "seem[s] to offer no more than insight into colloquial language at the profane level" (Dillon 1995: 135). Instead, I argue that the frequency of oaths, especially the ironic oaths in the *Clouds*, represents a sort of hyper-colloquialism intended as a parody to draw attention to the general lackadaisical attitude of Athenians toward cultural institutions. Indeed, it is this attitude of the Athenian majority that promoted the "tolerance of the free expression of intellectual criticism" (Dover 1976: 54).

Bibliography

Dillon, Matthew. (1995). “By Gods, Tongues, and Dogs: The use of oaths in Aristophanic comedy.” *Greece & Rome*, Vol. XLII, No. 2: 135-151.

Dover, J.K. (1972). *Aristophanic Comedy*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

----------. (1976). “The Freedom of The Intellectual in Greek Society.” *TAAANTA*, Vol. III: 24-54.