

Comic Commodities: Body Transformations in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* and *Birds*

With choruses of animals, characters who are personified concepts, and objects-turned-actors (e.g., kitchen gadgets as witnesses, *Vesp.* 937-939), Aristophanes is a rich source for thinking about the relationships between human, animal, and object bodies. On the one hand, the poet's frequent muddling of humans, animals, and objects may suggest a fantastical detachment from reality. However, in this conflation of categories (or bodies), one can also pinpoint notions stemming from practical Athenian reality. This paper will focus on passages in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* and *Birds* in which metaphors: 1) turn humans into objects and 2) animate or transform objects into other entities. I will argue that these human and object transformations are not only elements of comic imagination, but also moments that evoke the real world, primarily through their allusions to materiality and commodification.

Despite the vast array of props in Aristophanic comedy (expertly catalogued by English 1999) and the turn towards New Materialisms in Greek tragedy studies (e.g., Mueller 2016; Telò and Mueller 2018), objects in Aristophanes have received slim scholarly attention. Mario Telò's description of the Oracle Collector's book in *Birds* as a "supplementary body part, a prosthetic object" (2020, 236) and Maria Gerolemou's (2020) chapter on wings as prosthetics in the same comedy notably reflect on the materiality of specific objects. Moreover, David Christenson (2020) traces how props play a metapoetic role in *Acharnians*, illustrating the persona of Dikaiopolis as "cook-comedian". However, objects in these plays merit greater attention, especially when they function as embodied objects ("carefully wrought things which assume, interact with, substitute for, and/or become parts or extensions of human bodies", Gaifman and Platt 2018, 404), as in two metaphors explored in this paper. The contexts in which body

transformations occur in the *Acharnians* and *Birds* are also economic in nature. Scholars have argued for the presence of economic ideas in Aristophanes (Spielvogel 2001; see pp. 27-30), but the passages I will consider have not been studied within these parameters. Although Olson (1991) has recognized the importance of the economy in *Acharnians*, this view can be expanded to consider the “market” for wings in Clouducuckooland.

To illustrate these arguments, this paper will consider three case studies: the charcoal basket-turned-Acharnian hostage (*Ach.* 325-357), the sycophant who is verbally transformed into an earthen-ware vessel (*Ach.* 903-958), and wings sought after by hopeful visitors to Clouducuckooland (*Av.* 1337-1469). In each of these scenes, objects and people undergo a change of identity through metaphor. Dikaiopolis pretends the charcoal basket is a demesman of the Acharnians; the sycophant is imagined as a jar that is packed up for sale (κέραμον, 905, 928); and wings become advice (1360-1369) and a whip (1464)—metaphors that never materialize (cf. Sfyroeras 2020). These verbal transformations signify ontological instability: the categories in which these bodies exist are mutable. I argue that this instability, centered on relationships between people and objects, reflects basic economic ideas; the transformative potential of objects and people resembles the fluctuating values and exchange of commodities. While Dikaiopolis’ marketplace more naturally suggests an economic reading, viewing the wings in *Birds* as a desired commodity illustrates a continuity of practical economic ideas (such as supply and demand) between the two plays. In sum, beneath the imaginative transformations of object and human bodies, Aristophanes may be offering glimpses of market motivations relatable to his audience.

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