

Aspects of Time in Aristophanes' Plays

The extant records pertaining to the output of Aristophanes are particularly plentiful. The didaskaliae preserved in the manuscript hypotheses and facts recorded by Aristotle and other ancient authorities (scholars of the Alexandrian era) enable us to date the productions of ten of his eleven extant plays, including the fact that several of his works were re-submitted for second performance. This datable fraction is nearly a fourth of his total output. The would-be meta-theatrist is also blessed by much internal evidence such that we can make inferences about the time of day when a play was performed.

The very real possibility of temporal overlap between the early morning scene depicted on stage and the start of a new festival day at sunrise prompts reflection on the relationship between Aristophanes' texts and the historical performance. The author's aside in *Ecclesiazusae* (Ec. 1158-1159). "Don't act like dishonest courtesans, who only remember their latest companions," Aristophanes warns his public as his *Ecclesiazusae* draw to a close (chorus speaking, Ec. 1161-1162, trans. Henderson). "And don't hold it against me that the luck of the draw has put me onstage first" (Ec. 1158-1159). Read at face-value, these lines voice Aristophanes' concern that the audience might favor one of his fellow-contenders on the comic festival stage: the competitor's play that will come on after his own *Ecclesiazusae* may sway the easily-swayed Athenians with the roar of its good laughs still fresh in the public's memory at the time of the vote. "And don't hold it against me that the luck of the draw has put me onstage first," is definitive: the playwright knew well before performance, the day and the time of day when that play was scheduled to be performed. And indeed the dawn setting is corroborated by Praxagora's monologue directed at her lamp, as if it were the sun, and by the first character's reference to the cockscrow.

One can imagine that the spectators, gathering at dawn on the morning *Ecclesiazusae* was presented and knowing from its culturally absurd title that the play would feature women as assemblymen (made doubly ironic because the actual male gender of the players), would raise a hubbub of excited conversation about what they were about to see and hear. They could not help but look across from the theater to the Pnyx hill

nearby. [<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/fallofgreece/pnyx.jpg>] (for a map) During a meeting of the public assembly (Ecclesia), the voting assemblymen (ecclesiasts) would be gathering at the dawn on the Pnyx for a meeting having to do with the business of the city. The inter-connection is easily made because the layout of the seating area and arrangements of the theater resemble those of the Pnyx. The male audience members in the theater largely overlapped with the voting citizens of the assembly. Since once every years the assembly met in the theater instead of on the Pnyx, it would seem to the audience that their “today” was that occasion, and that the action onstage was the assembly for that meeting. The situation was hilarious before the opening trumpet sounded for silence at the beginning of the drama! The early morning setting works so effectively for Aristophanes that he lingers over it for more than 380 lines or nearly one third of the entire play. In a mirror-image scene intended to depict the Athenian men’s rude awakening to new realities, Blepyrus, Praxagora’s unwitting husband, is left to stumble around in the dark—and in women’s clothes—to take care of pressing business (Ec. 311-373). Praxagora opens with an elaborate comic address to the lamp she is holding up high, which she introduces as her much-valued accomplice in favorite night-time or other illicit (for women) activities (Ec. 1-18). This lamp becomes unnecessary as the sun slowly rises. The varied indications of time, however, which Aristophanes has lavishly imbedded in the script of his *Ecclesiazusae* would have worked best theatrically and metatheatrically if we accept that the timing of their actual delivery coincided with the timing of real-time daybreak at the morning performances of the festival, whether at the City Dionysia or at the Lenaea.

In this play Aristophanes does not choose to exploit specifically any particular of the metôra of which we can know little since the year of play and the festival of its production are not known precisely: Lenaia or Dionysia of 393-390. The referees to deities are standard oaths: “by Zeus and “by Hermes.” The spring sky of 391 is devoid of any observers’ interest; perhaps this was the year of production.

Overall, when the indications of time did become specific, they typically referred to early morning hours. The reverse might hold true, too: those comedies of Aristophanes that lack an early morning setting that becomes a functional constituent of the play’s prologue, such as *Knights*, *Birds*, *Thesmophoriazusae*, and *Frogs*, also lack the specific pointers to

time of day or the indicators of seasons or signs in the sky. Nonetheless, the many uncertainties that the performance record of the classical comedies still holds do not prevent us from concluding that Aristophanes liked to work with his favorite comic opening, the early morning scene, in plays that he planned to present at the mid- to late winter Lenaea festival. We will return to this preliminary conclusion and address its importance shortly, after we analyze some of those plays' opening scenes in more detail.

Dicaeopolis, in the opening lines of *Acharnians* is made to set up an astigmatism parallel to the one in *Ecclesiazousae*: acting onstage of the theater where the assembly did meet once a year, as if he were an early-arriving ecclesiasts on the Pnyx:

“Still it is the day of assembly; all should be here at daybreak, and yet the Pnyx is still deserted. They are gossiping in the marketplace, slipping hither and thither to avoid the vermilioned rope. The Prytanes even do not come; they will be late, but when they come they will push and fight each other for a seat in the front row. They will never trouble themselves with the question of peace. Oh! Athens! Athens! As for myself, I do not fail to come here before all the rest, and now, finding myself alone, I groan, yawn, stretch, break wind, and know not what to do; I make sketches in the dust, pull out my loose hairs, muse, think of my fields, long for peace, curse town life and regret my dear country home, . . .” (Anonymous translation from www.perseus.tufts.edu)

The metaphor of “All the world’s a stage” is made explicit by Aristophanes in other passages as well. In the *Knights*, this scene setting is given in a modern translation: “The Orchestra represents the Pnyx at Athens; in the background is the house of Demos.” In the opening lines, two crafty slaves in an inebriated state read out oracles that predict a change of government. The sausage-seller it says, will by tyrant over the city and its people (163-165):

Demosthenes

Oh! the fool! Your tripe! Do you see these tiers of people?

Sausage-Seller

Yes.

Demosthenes

You shall be master to them all, governor [165] of the market, of the harbors, of the Pnyx; you shall trample the Senate under foot, be able to cashier the generals, load them with fetters, throw them into gaol, and you will fornicate in the Prytaneum.

Sausage-Seller

What! I?

Demosthenes

You, without a doubt. But you do not yet see all the glory awaiting you. Stand on your basket [170] and look at all the islands that surround Athens.

(translation by Eugene O’Neil, emphasis mine).

The Athenians in the audience are the same as the Athenians of the market, the harbor, and the assembly. Thus the relationship between the demos gathering in physical theater space, as it would in the seating area of the Pnyx, is an audience with the instant opportunity to act as observers to everything around them, especially what they could see from the theater itself on a good day. From the different vantage points in the theater of Dionysus, the demos might see the city walls and four or five of its gates, various sanctuaries, temples, shrines, law courts, and private houses in the oldest part of Athens—south of the Acropolis, the islands nearby (Aegina and Salamis), the mountains by name (the well honeyed Hymettus), and at their backs of course loomed the Acropolis with its imposing temples and sanctuaries, (see First Clouds frag. 379.1, Frogs, 1055), geographies near and far, the harbor Piraeus, (known for its prostitutes then and now) (Peace 145,165-6), the Agora, Kerameikos, the swampy Limnê, some of the demes, etc. Many fellow Athenians of repute or disrepute, and recent city-wide events are alluded to in the plays, as well. Aristophanes uses familiar topographies, and familiar histories to evoke in his audience a sense of belonging to the scene being set. Indeed most of Aristophanes' plays are archetypes for the genre of situation comedy.

Familiar topographies and familiar recent history are mentionable subjects, right down to the time and the spring season (in the very first line of the Thesmophoriazusae, Euripides' kinsman calls on Zeus and wonders if the swallow, the harbinger of spring, is ever going to appear) and the time of day brought into the reality of the "O" that is the theater—how wonderful! The predictable routine of thousands of noisy people (including foreign visitors to Athens during the Dionysia) arriving and settling in within a short span of morning time gave the comic playwright ample opportunities to engage in meta-theatrical comments as we have noted. As the Athenians walk from their homes to the theater and settle in to watch the first play of the day, the one that had been chosen by lot to be presented before the remaining and rival plays, the theater-goers become an audience to an unknown comedy that is about to be set in motion.

And during this anticipatory interval, the denizens of Athens are enshrouded by another milieu—*ta meteôra* , "things and events in the heaven above" as LSJ defines it.

Celestial phenomena are always in motion too. Even children learn to identify the moon, despite its transmogrification from slender crescent to full disk and back again. And the by-then codified knowledge, the agricultural calendar, first expressed in our extant literature in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, was still ensconced in the minds of the theater-goers; many were farmers for whom seasonal phenomena were important to observe. They, if not their urban cousins, would recognize the sign stars visible in the morning (January for the *Lenaia*, March for the *Dionysia*). One could observe that *Spica* in the *Virgin* about to set on a March morning as a sign that the sun was at the Vernal equinox, for example, or that *Cassiopeia* was flat against the northern horizon, looking like an epigraphical *Mu*, and that the bright star in *Capricorn* (*Rigel Capricornis*), at the opposite place in the sky, were signs of the dead of winter, time for the *Lenaia*.

The planets and moon travel through the zodiacal constellations, most of whose names were the same, then and now. Visible on a January morning one would notice *Antares* in *Scorpio*, *Spica* in *Virgo*, *Regulus* in *Leo*, *Libra* and *Cancer* on the Zodiac with their dim stars and the easily recognized *Sagittarius*; away from the Zodiac shone several bright stars *Vega* in the *Lyre*, *Deneb* in *Cygnus*, *Altair* in *Aquila* (these three constitute what we now see as the "summer triangle," and *Bootes* with its bright *Arcturus*, *Ophiuchus*, *Cepheus*, *Hercules*, *Ursas Major* and *Minor* (with *Polaris* which, then, was not a pole star). By March the attendees at the *Dionysia* would marvel at a slightly different panoply of stars as they walked through early dawn to the theater: *Pisces* (only one of the fishes) and *Aquarius* would join the Zodiacal train in the east with *Capricorn*, *Sagittarius*. *Scorpio*, *Libra* and *Virgo*, while the lengthy *Leo*, and dim *Cancer*, visible in January, had disappeared in the west. The summer triangle with its two bird constellations, *Cygnus* and *Aquila*, was very prominent; *Arcturus* in *Bootes*, the *Ursas*, *Draco*, *Pegasus*, *Andromeda* and *Perseus* (partly) shone, while *Cassiopeia* had righted herself to appear as a *W* on its side.

Since the *Dionysia* took place before mid-month, during which times a dawn observer might see the 10 to 13 day old moon setting far in the west, the moon was not in the critical part of the sky to early theatergoers. And if we may assume that *Lenaia* followed the other festivals' calendars which avoided days in the waning months, the same lunar

lack would pertain to their attendees as well. The planets, being wanderers might appear in any of the Zodiacal constellations above the horizon, depending on their motions. Slow old Saturn (Kronos) stays locked in the same constellation for two-and-a-half years; Jupiter (Zeus) moves through one constellation every year; each of these remains invisible for 30-40 days every year while the sun resides in their constellation of the moment. Mars (Ares), Venus (Aphrodite), and Mercury (Hermes) abide irregularly among the Zodiacal constellations, the latter two never moving very far from the sun (Venus's maximum elongation is 47°, Mercury's is 22°). So which of the several gods the demos would view on the way to the theater must be determined with an almanac, a determination possible only if the year of production is extant information.

The *Clouds*, laden as it is with references to the moon, presents us with the first problem of interpretation, vis a vis ta meteôra. No moonshine was part of the audience's prelude--walking to the theater and taking their places in it. So how does the moon fit into the audience's experience of its immediate milieu? The first mention of the moon occurs in the opening scene where Strepsiades calls for a lamp, giving away the time of performance as dawn; the moon's phases have to do with the calendrics of debt payment, and indeed a great conceit in the play is the notion that Socrates can affect the moon in such a way as to cancel Strepsiades' debts. Socrates' craft in this matter is alluded to in these lines (172 ff.):

Strep.

In what way? Tell me.

Dis.

As he was investigating the courses of the moon and her revolutions, then as he was gaping upward a lizard in the darkness dropped upon him from the roof. (ζητούντος αὐτοῦ τῆς σελήνης τὰς ὁδοὺς καὶ τὰς περιφορὰς)

Strep.

I am amused at a lizard's having dropped on Socrates.

Plato's Socrates eschews such studies as physics and astronomy. Aristophanes's version of Socrates' kind of activity may have been made just to lump Socrates together with the physical philosophers and their cohorts, some of whose ideas befuddled the public even to the point of exiling some and even putting others to death. Yet there may be some serious point to all this, and these lunar associations may not just be loony, but point to some meteoric event.

First of all, the city has neglected to appoint a competent record-keeper (Clouds 615-623) for necessary intercalations of extra months into the lunar calendar. The latter grievance leaves Aristophanes with an ideal occasion to deliver a personal stab at one of the contemporary politicians, Hyperbolus (Clouds 623-626). As soon as the chorus leader concludes her comic tirade in apparent support of the moon's taking revenge for the ills done her, Socrates makes a new appearance, stepping out of the Thinkery. In the ensuing quibble between a frustrated Socrates and the hard-of-learning Strepsiades, there is more talk about making the moon disappear. This time, the allusion takes the form of Strepsiades' proactive self-serving proposal; without the moon he may dodge the demands of his creditors: the maturation date of the loans they have granted to him follows the regular schedule based on the day of the month.

CHORUS

“ . . . For if there should be any expedition without prudence, then we either thunder or drizzle small rain. And then, when you were for choosing as your general the Paphlagonian tanner, hateful to the gods, we contracted our brows and were enraged; and thunder burst through the lightning; and the Moon forsook her usual paths; and the Sun immediately drew in his wick to himself, and declared he would not give you light, if Cleon should be your general.” ἡ σελήνη δ' **ἐξέλειπε** τὰς ὁδοὺς, ὃ δ' ἥλιος 585 τὴν θορυαλλίδ' εἰς ἑαυτὸν εὐθέως ξυνελκύσας οὐ φανεῖν ἔφασκεν ὑμῖν (585)

The boldfaced Greek word is a verbal form whose noun is “eclipse”. Furthermore the moon becomes a reported character who has complained to the chorus of clouds that she is angry for she has suffered dreadful things (δεινὰ γὰρ πεπονθέναι (610)). While the remainder of this passage has to do with complaints by the moon that the lunar calendar has not been updated correctly, a following passage again may well refer to an eclipse of the moon (750):

Strep.

Now tell me this, pray; if I were to purchase a Thessalian witch, and draw down the moon by night, and then shut it up, as if it were a mirror, in a round crest-case, and then carefully keep it-

Soc.

What good, pray, would this do you?

Strep.

What? If the moon were to rise no longer anywhere, I should not pay the interest.

Soc.

Why so, pray?

Strep.

Because the money is lent out by the month.

(Στρεψιάδης

γυναῖκα φαρμακίδ' εἰ πριάμενος Θετταλὴν
καθέλοιμι νύκτωρ τὴν σελήνην, εἴτα δὴ
αὐτὴν καθεῖρξαιμ' ἐς λοφείον στρογγύλον,
ὥσπερ κάτοπρον, κᾶτα τηροίην ἔχων —

Σωκράτης

τί δῆτα τοῦτ' ἂν ὠφελήσειέν σ';

Στρεψιάδης

ὅ τι;

εἰ μήκετ' ἀνατέλλοι σελήνη μηδαμοῦ,
οὐκ ἂν ἀποδοίην τοὺς τόκους.

Σωκράτης

ὅτι τί δῆ;

Στρεψιάδης

ὅτι κατὰ μῆνα τὰ γύριον δανείζεται.

Later, when the Thinkery of Socrates is set aflame, some of the guilty party's crimes are set forth:

Strep.

For what has come into your heads that you acted insolently toward the gods, and pried into the seat of the moon? Chase, pelt, smite them, for many reasons, but especially because you know that they offended against the gods! (1506)

Στρεψιάδης

τί γὰρ μαθόντες τοὺς θεοὺς ὑβρίζετε,
καὶ τῆς σελήνης ἐσκοπεῖσθε τὴν ἔδραν;

Of particular interest is the description of the moon when entrapped in a case so as to appear like a mirror. Indeed during a full eclipse of the moon the disc does not go completely dark, for the light falling on it from sunlight refracted by the earth's atmosphere illuminates it and colors its surface as if it were seen in a dusky mirror (ancient mirrors were polished bronze, not silvered glass).

If we consult a computerized almanac for the period just prior to the date of production of Clouds I in 423, we find three lunar eclipses occurred: the first one a total eclipse on April 14, 425 (BCE) just past midnight; the second on October 9, 425 when the full moon rose already in partial eclipse then went on to totality at 7 pm; the third happened nearly a year later on September 28, 424 at 10 pm, reaching about 90% totality.

It is the habit of lunar eclipses to recur in groups of three or four and then leave a

hiatus of several years. One can be certain that ancient observers knew this fact, and they likely noticed that the interval between visible events was 177 days or a multiple of that period. 3/14/425 is 177 days earlier than 10/9/425, and 9/28/424 is 344 days later. I am reasonably confident that the canny Greek observers knew that more precise fact as well; perhaps Strepsiades' last charge adumbrates such activity personified on stage by the members of the thinkery who committed hubris by studying the gods and examining the fundament of the moon.

The groupings of 3-4 eclipses followed by hiatus of is owing to some curious facts about the interaction between lunar (often visible) and solar eclipses (mainly invisible) that are beyond the scope of this essay. Since first Clouds was withdrawn, we cannot be certain that, the lunar palaver in the play refers to eclipse events of 425-424, Suffice it to say, however, that there were groups following: the next group of lunar eclipses began on 2/2 421 followed by 7/28 421 and 1/24 and 7/17 in 420. Next upon that group, the series of lunar eclipse visible in Greece was on 11/21/418, then on 11/9/417. One group of lunar eclipses or another would be in the minds of the assemblymen at Athens, and one group or another of speculators about ta meteôra would provide Aristophanes ample comic grist to fill his hoppers of hilarity.

Indeed, relying upon other meteoric data available from the almanac, lets us ascertain that 423 was not a possible date for the composition of the received text. Even more curious than the conceit of calling down the moon to which art Socrates may aspire, is his asseveration that Zeus does not exist (356 ff.):

Cho.

Hail, O ancient veteran, hunter after learned speeches! And thou, O priest of most subtle trifles! Tell us what you require? For we would not hearken to any other of the recent meteorological sophists, except to Prodicus; to him, on account of his wisdom and intelligence; and to you, because you walk proudly in the streets, and cast your eyes askance, and endure many hardships with bare feet, and in reliance upon us lookest supercilious.

Strep.

O Earth (O Gê), what a voice! How holy and dignified and wondrous!

Soc.

For, in fact, these alone are goddesses; and all the rest is nonsense.

Strep.

But come, by the Earth (pros tês gês), is not Jupiter [Zeus], the Olympian, a god?

Soc.

What Jupiter? Do not trifle. There is no Jupiter.

ποῖός Ζεὺς; οὐ μὴ ληρήσεις· οὐδ' ἔστι Ζεὺς.

Strep.

What do you say? Who rains then? For first of all explain this to me.

Soc.

These to be sure. I will teach you it by powerful evidence. Come, where have you ever seen him raining at any

time without Clouds? And yet he ought to rain in fine weather, and these be absent.

Strep.

By Apollo (nê ton Apollô), of a truth you have rightly confirmed this by your present argument. And yet, before this, I really thought that Jupiter [Zeus] caused the rain. But tell me who is it that thunders. This makes me tremble.

Soc.

These, as they roll, thunder.

Strep.

In what way? you all-daring man!

Soc.

When they are full of much water, and are compelled to be borne along, being necessarily precipitated when full of rain, then they fall heavily upon each other and burst and clap.

Strep.

Who is it that compels them to borne along? Is it not Jupiter [ouk ho Zeus]?

Soc.

By no means, but aethereal Vortex [Dinos].

Strep.

Vortex? It had escaped my notice that Jupiter [Zeus] did not exist, and that Vortex now reigned in his stead. But you have taught me nothing as yet concerning the clap and the thunder.

Soc.

Have you not heard me, that I said that the Clouds, when full of moisture, dash against each other and clap by reason of their density?

The normal pious oath is “By Zeus.” In this context where Socrates denies even that Zeus exists, even the normally pious Strepsiades is made to take his oaths upon Earth or Apollo, although consistently before that, his pious exclamations favor Zeus, and they resume normalcy after this passage (the upstart Phidippides swears not by Zeus but by Poseidon (line 83)). Despite Socrates’

attribution to the Vortex (Dinos) of the Clouds’ weather power, the Clouds themselves are catholic in their oath taking (563):

Chorus

I first invoke, to join our choral band, the mighty Jupiter, ruling on high, the monarch of gods; and the potent master of the trident, the fierce upheaval of earth and briny sea; and our father of great renown, most august Aether, life-supporter of all; and the horse-guider, who fills the plain of the earth with exceeding bright beams, a mighty deity among gods and mortals.

Elsewhere in the play, during their argument about whether or not Justice prevails, The Just Cause and the Unjust Cause bandy words, the latter taunting that “ . . . if Justice prevails then why has Zeus not perished, he who tied up his own father?” (905)

These conceits all have to do with the almanac, and the almanac indicates that they were composed not in 423 when Zeus was a bright morning star at the time of production but rather in 419-16 when Zeus-Jupiter was not visible in the dawn skies of March.

Corroboration for a seeming coincidence between dates of production for the *Clouds* and the non-appearance of Zeus among the play's many conceits can be had by observing what takes place in *Thesmophoriazusaë*. We know its date and its venue: Greater Dionysia 411 BCE; its scenario is at the Thesmophorion on the third day of the festival (80). The almanac reveals that the non-appearance of Jupiter in the morning skies of March mentioned in the paragraph above was gradually amended in the years following 416. The planet worked its way from setting at dawn to rising earlier and earlier so that in 413-412 it was a morning star high in the eastern sky at dawn. What is true of 411 is that Jupiter's bright disc was much closer to the sun and appeared just briefly in the dawn light before being blotted out by the rising sun. This apparition, called the heliacal rise, is a phenomenon of particular importance to the folkways of the Greeks. It occurred about March 5 of that year on which date Jupiter was about 6° west of the sun, just far enough to appear briefly before the encroaching dawn. By 19 March it was 12° up and quite visible in the early dawn sky. No surprise then, when the first two words of the play are "O Zeus"! The setting of the play is early (heôthinou). The name Zeus recurs some eight times in the play, mostly as part of an oath "by Zeus," but towards the end of the the aspect of the god clearly addressed and desired is "Zeus Savior" (1009). Elsewhere in the play (316) the god is addressed as *megalonume* (he of the august name), *pankrates* (Almighty) (369), in prayer again as O Zeus (870); there are also several of the ordinary "By Zeus" oaths.

Acharnians produced at the Lenaia in 425 affords another opportunity to check our hypothesis that the audience's experience during the meteôra of morning light is reflected in the registry of divine names in the play. The opening scene takes up full forty lines: Dicaeopolis, the protagonist, keeps venting his frustration as he sits waiting on the Pnyx for the assembly-meeting to open. He rightfully complains that, as always, the apolitical mass—let alone the bigheaded prytaneis—does not show up on time and needs to be dragged away from the commercial distractions of the agora. When the officials or the prytaneis finally show up, VIP-style late, Dicaeopolis cannot refrain from commenting: "Well, here are the Presidents—at noon!" (Ach. 40). But since the meeting has not formally opened yet, his choice of an adjective to describe the prytaneis, *mesembrinoi*, "noon-day prytaneis," must be read as an exaggeration that, if anything, only reinforced the demand

resting on all attendees to arrive early in the morning (the requirement to be among the first six thousand assemblymen to attend, if one wanted to receive the payment of a few obols, belabored also in Ecclesiastes.(83-85, 282-284, 290-292c, 378-380, 392). The scene thus conveys the comic characters' strong sense of urgency to make it in time for the assembly to open and for them to receive their pay—an urgency that rested more heavily on the simple and poorer Athenians and to which, no doubt, many of the spectators could relate personally. The jostling “noon-day” officials of the imaginary assembly may even be the same latecomers and troublemakers in the comedy's audience, arriving at the very moment that they are being mentioned. Such a staged coincidence, based on the predictability of the behavior of the high and mighty, would give Dicaeopolis and Aristophanes a first opportunity to poke fun at the politicians of the day.

When we consult the almanac for January 425, we find that Jupiter had risen heliacally in December and by mid March was riding high in South, an obvious presence to theatergoers making their way South into the theater. The December rising was followed shortly by the heliacal rise of Mercury, then Venus, then Saturn.; Hermes heading the processional as if leading the other two heavenly denizens toward Zeus on high by mid January. His job done, Hermes quickly sank back below the horizon by mid February. These phenomena, witnessed by Athenians in the weeks prior to the play, are almost coordinated by words uttered by Dicaeopolis: “O Zeus whose eyes see everywhere, . . .” ὦ Ζεῦ διόπτα καὶ κατόπτα πανταχῇ, (435). There are several other invocations of the god. At line 812 Zeus is invoked at the Deity of the City (Zeus asteios); otherwise, except for the chorus's calling upon Zeus to bring Antimachus to ruin, in the last line, there is no further mention of the god by name, though there is an amusing reference to him in the Boeotian dialect: ἵττω Δεύς. (912)

Hermes is sworn by several times “by Hermes”, once in his special role as god of merchandising (816) : Hermes was a god of transitions and boundaries. He was quick and cunning, and moved freely between the worlds of the mortal and divine, as emissary and messenger of the gods, intercessor between mortals and the divine, and conductor of souls into the afterlife. He was protector and patron of travelers, herdsmen, thieves, orators and wit, literature and poets, athletics and sports, invention and trade.

All these traits are to be associated with the phenomena of the planet Mercury as seen from Earth, by interconnections, some obvious from the phenomena described above, others too lengthy to specify in this essay.

Turning to 424's Lenaia, we learn that Aristophanes won with the play *Knights*. The play is a satire on the social and political life of classical Athens during the Peloponnesian War and in this respect it is typical of all the dramatist's early plays. Indeed, it features as chorus a group of Knights (Equites), cavalymen-at-war. It is unique however in the relatively small number of its characters and this was due to its scurrilous preoccupation with one man, the pro-war populist Cleon. Cleon had prosecuted Aristophanes for slandering the polis with an earlier play, *The Babylonians* (426 BC), for which the young dramatist had promised revenge in the *Acharnians* (425 BC), and it was in *The Knights* (424 BC) that his revenge was exacted. The play relies heavily on allegory and it has been condemned by one modern scholar as 'an embarrassing failure'.^[3] However, *The Knights* won first prize at the Lenaia festival when it was produced in 424 BC.

Perhaps the allegories are reinforced by the visible drama in ta meteôra. The dominant morning star in early 424 was Ares (the planet Mars), newly risen helically. As they lie, the historical facts describe a vendetta between the jingoist Cleon and the poet Aristophanes. The blatant fact of Ares in their faces every morning for weeks would sensitize the Athenians to the presence of a murderous war-monger even if he be disguised by the name of his place of origin, Paphlagonia. No mask maker may dare create a likeness of Cleon for fear of his arbitrary power-wielding, but the presence of Mars overhead is mask enough. Jupiter and Mercury were also newly risen heliacally by production time in early January.

The godsend (*kata theon*, line 147) sausage seller, Agoracriticus is featured by Aristophanes to be a Hermes in human guise. His peculiar oath is:
"By our Hermes of the market-place, if caught in the act, why, I perjure myself before those who saw me?"
The windfall sausage-seller Agoracritus's name and activity mimic Hermes (god of commerce, amidst the gods, whose trade brings him close to the heat). He relies on being a shameless prankster to defeat Paphlagonian. He outdebates the skilled orator Cleon-Paphlagonian (Cleon was noted for his oratorical skills), and who could do this but the god

of the Agora and of the aide of all orators, Hermes? Later, Cleon-Paphlagonian admits his own defeat both as orator and as thief: “So you are to belong to another; 'tis certain he cannot be a greater thief, but perhaps he may be a luckier one.” Agoracriticus even compares himself to a god (1338) as he speaks to the Demos: “Ah! if you but remembered what you were formerly and what you did, you would for a certainty believe me to be a god.” and he attributes his victory to Zeus (1253), calling upon him as Zeus Hellanios, (Protector of all Hellas) Jupiter watches the whole scenario from on high.

In the *Wasps*, which won second prize in 422 BCE, Aristophanes' characters revel in a long comic prologue while it is still dark outside and the main characters are sound asleep (*Wasps*, 1-138). The slave Xanthias describes his master Philocleon's restless sleeping habits, as he lives—and sleeps—in fear of missing his chance to convict the accused in the early morning meetings of the Athenian lawcourts (*Wasps*, 87-102). It might have been dramatically very effective if, in the course of Xanthias' detailed description, a sleepwalking Philocleon acted out some of the most graphic, “nightmarish” scenes. Thus Xanthias depicts Philocleon in one scene: “He's so used to holding a voting pebble that he gets out of bed with his first three fingers pressed together, like somebody offering incense at the new moon.” Zeus is invoked a number of times—all in the formulaic “by Zeus” fashion except at 323 where Philocleon invokes the god twice by name with the epithet *mega brontêsas* hoping Zeus will transmogrify him in some comic way. Hermes' name and person are absent from the play.

In a way *Wasps* is a test case. There are no *meteôra* of note in the dawn sky and special references to deity are absent from the text as well..

Aristophanes' *Peace* won second prize at the City Dionysia in 421. Hermes as the god himself is a character, a *prosopon* with a mask designed to look like what Hermes looked like in the conception of the maskmakers. Every house in Athens had in front some image of Hermes, some with little detail, some made with sculptural excellence in mind. These images bore the name *Hermes Propylaios*--Hermes-deity-of --the front-door. Every gate to the city too was watched over by an image of *Hermes propylaios*. No surprise, then,

that the role of the god in this play is as the watcher at the gate of Olympus.

Trygaeus, the main character, has as his preoccupation ending the war by imploring Zeus in person and begging for peace. After many wily, but failed attempts to reach Olympus, he trains a giant dung beetle to act as his Bellerophon and bear him on high, only to learn from Hermes that the other gods have departed for the farthest vault of heaven. Furthermore, he learns that near-Olympus has a new denizen—War (polemos), with his entourage. This maleficent god has imprisoned Peace in a cave, and is bent on grinding all the Greeks up in his mortice and pestle. While he is off searching for warmongering men to act as pestles, Trygaeus gathers pacifists from all over Greece (the Chorus) to liberate Peace and restore her conditions.

The almanac shows us facts that fit the divine progopography in Peace. Mighty Mars (very bright, with a -1 magnitude) was in opposition (culminating at midnight) in early January of 421, setting at dawn. As January gave way to February, its setting in the west got earlier so that it became invisible in the dawn sky. Meanwhile Jupiter and Venus were on the east side of the sun and so invisible at dawn (on the farside of heaven's vault), while Mercury enjoyed a solitary helical rising and remained at maximum elongation of ca. 16° for the week around February 22—Hermes propylaios!

In 414 Aristophanes won the 2nd prize for comedy at the City Dionysia with *Birds*. Zeus is invoked or named some thirty times in the play, and the almanac (no surprise) reveals that Jupiter had it heliacal rising on November 9, 415, and that by the time of production was 40° high in the southern sky at daybreak. Mercury rose heliacally about 18 February and stayed suspended in the dawn sky for a long time during a near maximal apparition (22° East of the Sun). There are only two mentions of the god Hermes in the play, one of which corroborates the almanac and the experience of ta meteôra by the audience:

“Pisthetaerus You talk nonsense! By Zeus, Hermes is a god and has wings and flies and so do many other gods. First of all, Victory flies with golden wings, Eros is undoubtedly winged too, and Hera is compared by Homer to a timorous dove. (574 ff.)’

Most of the “Zeus” occurrences come in the unremarkable phrase “by Zeus.” But the bird protagonists of the play have a plan to take over Olympus, and Zeus is often mentioned in

this connection, e.g.,

1) Euelpides

Undoubtedly, but sharpen your beak well; Zeus won't be in a hurry to hand over his scepter to the woodpecker. [480]

2) Pisthetaerus

But the strongest proof of all is that Zeus, who now reigns, [515] is represented as standing with an eagle on his head as a symbol of his royalty; his daughter has an owl, and Phoebus, as his servant, has a hawk.

3) Pisthetaerus

When anyone sacrifices and, according to the rite, offers the entrails to the gods, these birds take their share before Zeus. [520]

4) Pisthetaerus

[550] First I advise that the birds gather together in one city and that they build a wall of great bricks, like that at [Babylon](#), round the plains of the air and the whole region of space that divides earth from heaven.

Epops

Oh, Cebriones! oh, Porphyryon! what a terribly strong place!

Pisthetaerus

Then, when this has been well done and completed, you demand back the empire from Zeus; [555] if he will not agree, if he refuses and does not at once confess himself beaten, you declare a sacred war against him and forbid the gods henceforward to pass through your country [550] First I advise that the birds gather together in one city and that they build a wall of great bricks, like that at [Babylon](#), round the plains of the air and the whole region of space that divides earth from heaven.

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5) Euelpides

[610] Ah! ah! these are far better kings for us than Zeus!

6) Chorus

If you recognize us as gods, we shall be your divining Muses, through us you will know the winds and the seasons, summer, [725] winter, and the temperate months. We shall not withdraw ourselves to the highest clouds like Zeus, but shall be among you and shall give to you [730] and to your children and the children of your children, health and wealth, long life, peace, youth, laughter, songs and feasts; in short, you will all be so well off, [735] that you will be weary and cloyed with enjoyment.

7) Pisthetaerus

Why, what's the matter, Prometheus?

Prometheus

[1505] Sh! sh! Don't call me by my name; you will be my ruin, if Zeus should see me here. But, if you want me to tell you how things are going in heaven, take this umbrella and shield me, so that the gods don't see me.

Pisthetaerus

[1510] I can recognize Prometheus in this cunning trick. Come, quick then, and fear nothing; speak on.

Prometheus

Then listen.

Pisthetaerus

I am listening, proceed!

Prometheus

Zeus is done for.

Pisthetaerus

Ah! and since when, pray?

Prometheus

[1515] Since you founded this city in the air. There is not a man who now sacrifices to the gods; the smoke of the victims no longer reaches us. Not the smallest offering comes! We fast as though it were the festival of Demeter. [1520] The barbarian gods, who are dying of hunger, are bawling like Illyrians and threaten to make an armed descent upon Zeus, if he does not open markets where joints of the victims are sold.

Let us turn to *Lysistrata*, produced in 411, probably at the Lenaia. How then does the role of seemingly casual invocations and acts of swearing by the names of gods play out in the *Lysistrata*? The *Lysistrata* is one of those comedies that begins with Aristophanes' favorite early morning scene (*Lys.* 1-77). When the conversation topic of the women's "typical" tardiness has run its course, the Spartan Lampito swears by the Twin Gods, that is, by the Dioscuri or Castor and Pollux, the brothers of Helen and special patrons gods to the Spartans (*Lys.* 81). The *asteres* Castor and Pollux were still visible in the SW sky until

about 1 February when they set (Last morning visibility). On 1 January that year, Jupiter was not visible in the dawn skies. In the text there are only standard invocations of Zeus, eleven in number. Mars, however was a powerful morning presence having risen heliacally about October 1 and persisted in its eastern venue during the interim, and Hermes rose into the morning skies, then fell back into the dawn light by mid month.

Of course the main subject of the play is war versus peace; and words for war appear some eleven times in the play including the etymology of the heroine's name (**Lysistrata**), while words for peace appear fourteen times.

Characteristics of Hermes also appear in the play. The women are slippery rogues: *panourgoi* who own that feminine mentality (*thêleia phrên* 705). Lysistrata has exhibited the shifty nature of that god and is a veritable Odysseus:

“Hail, Wonder of all women! Now you must be in turn
Hard, shifting, clear, deceitful, noble, crafty, sweet, and stern.
The foremost men of Hellas, smitten by your fascination,
Have brought their tangled quarrels here for your sole arbitration. (1072)

Frogs produced for the Lenaia in 405 gives little indication that it was a morning play. Ta meteôra for this year were not very showy either. Mercury underwent a weak elongation in January, perhaps not rising into visibility (certainly not in a place like the foggy English isles), and Mars rose heliacally in late March. There are eighteen invocations of Zeus of the formula type, and since Dionysus, a character, is the son of Zeus, that connection is made also. While Zeus was not present in the morning sky, where events are most ominous, Jupiter was high in the western sky at this time.

Some byplay on Hermes's attributes occurs during the debate between Euripides and Aeschylus. A quotation from *Choephoroi* as Orestes addresses the grave of his father elicits this by play:

Aeschylus

“Subterranean Hermes, guardian of my father's realms,” —

Euripides

Doesn't Orestes say this at the grave
Of his dead father?

Aeschylus

I grant that much.

Euripides

Well, seeing that his father died a death
of violence, slain by a woman's hand,
in a secret plot, how can he say that Hermes guarded anything?

Dionysus

Not that one, but the Luck-Bringer
Hermes he called "Subterranean", and he made it clear by saying
that he has this function from his father.

Euripides

You made an even bigger mistake than I imagined.
For if he has this underground junction from his father—

Hermes underground, is, of course, the aspect of the planet when it is not above the
horizon. And in the early spring of 405, it wasn't.

Plutus was enacted in 388, but we do not know for which festival it was written. At the
time of the Lenaia Venus alone shone in the morning sky, but 1 February Jupiter rose
heliacally, followed by the rising of Hermes a fortnight later. Much is made in this play of
the powers of Zeus versus those of Wealth (*Plutus*).

Chremylus

Indeed? Ah! you are the biggest poltroon of all the gods! Why, Zeus with his throne [125] and his
lightnings would not be worth an obolus if you recovered your sight, were it but for a few moments.

Plutus

Impious man, don't talk like that.

Chremylus

Fear nothing! I will prove to you that you are far more powerful and mightier than he.

Plutus

I mightier than he?

Chremylus

Aye, by heaven! *To Cario* [130] For instance, what is the basis of the power that Zeus wields over the
other gods?

Cario

Money; he has so much of it.

Chremylus

And who gives it to him?

Cario

pointing to Plutus

This fellow.

Chremylus

If sacrifices are offered to him, is not *Plutus* their cause?

Cario

Undoubtedly, for it's wealth that all demand and clamor most loudly for.

Chremylus

[135] Thus it's *Plutus* who is the fount of all the honors rendered to Zeus, whose worship he can wither up
at the root, if it so pleases him.

A later passage makes an explicit reference to the newly risen Jupiter:

Cario

What joy for my master and even more for Plutus! The god has regained his sight; [635] his eyes sparkle with the greatest brilliancy, thanks to the benevolent care of Asclepius.

Leader of the Chorus

Oh! what transports of joy! oh! what shouts of gladness!

Cario

Aye! one is compelled to rejoice, whether one wants to or not.

Leader of the Chorus

I will sing to the honor of [640] Asclepius, the son of illustrious Zeus, with a resounding voice; he is the beneficent star which men adore.

And, of course Hermes is a character, the guardian of the gateway:

Hermes

No, I was going to knock and you forestalled me by opening. Come, call your master quick, then his wife and his children, [1105] then his slave and his dog, then yourself and his pig.

Cario

And what's it all about?

Hermes

It's about this, rascal! Zeus wants to serve you all with the same sauce and hurl the lot of you into the Barathrum.

Cario

aside

[1110] Have a care for your tongue, you bearer of ill tidings! *To Hermes* But why does he want to treat us in that scurvy fashion?

Hermes

Because you have committed the most dreadful crime. Since Plutus has recovered his sight, there is nothing for us other gods, neither incense, nor laurels, [1115] nor cakes, nor victims, nor anything in the world.

Cario

And you will never be offered anything more; you governed us too ill.

Hermes

I care nothing at all about the other gods, but it's myself. I tell you I am dying of hunger.

We have perused Aristophanes' eleven preserved comedies for the dispersed and largely overlooked cues of stage time as cosmic time and also to deduce new meanings from the pre-dawn settings and other references that some of the plays have in common. It is especially in the realm of the comedies' reception and in their history of re-performance that those cues and references have been ignored, even though they bear the potential of profoundly altering the ways in which modern productions of the ancient plays are staged. However, those vital constituents of some of the comedies have been underexplored also in the traditional philological study of Aristophanes' work and again in recent trends in

performance theory. What you read here is but a modest start

Conclusion:

Rush Rehm recently made the point that “[t]he openness of the Athenian theatre to the natural and civic environment worked a sympathetic magic that other theatres must struggle to achieve” (Radical Theatre, 26-27). He goes on to illustrate his claim by citing a chorus passage from the first stasimon of Sophocles’ *Antigone* (100-105):

Hail the sun! Brightest
of all that ever dawned
on the seven gates of Thebes,
great eye of golden day,
sending light across
the rippling waters of Dirce . . .

The Athenian audience gathered at the Theater of Dionysus does not need to expend much effort to imagine the scene of the sun rising over Thebes: many times, it has seen the sun rise from behind the mountain peaks of Hymettus to the East, as on that very morning of the historical first performance of Sophocles’ *Antigone*.” Rehm claims that the Athenian theatergoers who watched this performance also saw the morning sunlight reflect off the Ilissus river further down south of the Theater of Dionysus, perhaps at the moment when Sophocles’ chorus evoked the glistening of the waters of Theban Dirce. Rehm also relates the implications of the sun’s rise, its zenith and warmth that makes Polyneices’ corpse rot to the distress of *Antigone* (Ant. 410-417), and its “racing” to complete “many laps” (Ant. 1064-1065). Rehm concludes that the (mentions of the) sun’s movements highlight crucial stages and turning points in the plot development of the tragedy, but they also mark how actual time progresses during the course of the performance (Radical Theatre, 27).

The play, the—unpolluted—skies, and the physical environment of Athens as it spreads out below the Theater of Dionysus meet each other at the very moment of the performance’s actualization in space as well as in time.

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