

# Ancient Greek Comedy

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Genre – Texts – Reception

Essays in Honour of Angus M. Bowie

Edited by  
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Dimitrios Kanellakis

# Types and Functions of *Para Prosdokian* in Aristophanes – And What About Oxymoron?

‘He has a great future behind him ...’

This joke is reported by Sigmund Freud in his *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, as having been made about a not-so-promising politician.<sup>1</sup> The contradiction between ‘future’ and ‘behind’ and the intrusion of the latter into the closing part of what is a well-known expression, in place of the expected ‘ahead of’, has a technical term: this is a *para prosdokian* joke.<sup>2</sup>

*Para prosdokian* is an obvious device of comic language – and arguably the only figure of speech that has been identified, throughout centuries of literary criticism, with a single genre, namely comedy. This taking-for-granted seems to be a reason why this figure has not been sufficiently studied – characteristically, it is not even mentioned in *The Language of Greek Comedy*.<sup>3</sup> In another paper, I have sketched a methodology for identifying *para prosdokian* jokes and deduced their typology from a morphological point of view, the parts of a comedy in which they occur, and the characters who tell them.<sup>4</sup> Now it is time for the next step: to outline the dramatic usage of the figure.

To do so, this chapter identifies, and offers a close reading of, the most characteristic types and functions of *para prosdokian* jokes: para-proverbial, paratragic, magnifying, satirical, and celebratory ones.<sup>5</sup> I draw on Aristophanes’

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1 Freud 1905, 16, 185.

2 I.e. ‘a “straight” sequence interrupted by a sudden explosive joke’ (Silk 2000a, 137) or, in a narrow sense, ‘a figure of speech in which the latter part of an idiom, proverb, or well-known expression or formula of words is altered to make an unexpected and humorous ending, as in “If I understand you correctly – it will be the first time ever”’ (Macquarie Dictionary 2013).

3 Willi 2002. Note that the ‘interesting surprise’ which Cassio speaks of (Willi 2002, 80) is not a *para prosdokian*, since the word concerned (ῥᾶδινα instead of ῥᾶδια) appears at the start of the line in question (Epicharm. fr. 97.8). The inclusion of the term in Sommerstein 2019 marks a positive turn.

4 Kanellakis 2020. That research began as a Master’s dissertation supervised by Angus Bowie, and this sequel is pertinently included in the present volume, as it was he who taught me – more than anyone – always to go a step further. Special thanks to my co-editor Almut Fries for her feedback.

5 I avoid a strict distinction between ‘types’ and ‘functions’, due to overlaps which will be shown below.