



## ARISTOPHANES AND ATHENA IN THE PARABASIS OF CLOUDS

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This paper discusses the ode and antode of Aristophanes' *Clouds* with a view to appreciating the author's self-presentation in the parabasis. In these passages, the clouds assume many forms and speak in many voices— sometimes they are clouds, and sometimes they are Athenian citizens— and they invoke deities, including Athena, in a variety of forms. Scholars have long noted the ambiguous status of these deities and have offered a number of competing explanations for it.<sup>1</sup> But I believe we can understand the poet's presentation of the gods more fully by focusing on the prominent place that Athena occupies in the chorus. I shall argue that the ambiguous nature of the clouds is essential to the poet's purpose. Through it Aristophanes can have an all-knowing chorus of clouds imply a claim about the poet's art with a striking image of Athena connected to the clouds' dual perspective as gods and Athenians.

Of special interest is the characterization of Athena as "charioteer of the aegis" (αἰγίδος ἡνίοχος, 602). This image, as I will argue, is fundamental to Aristophanes' self-presentation in the play. In the parabasis (518–62), as is well-known, the poet expresses disappointment over the treatment of the original comedy and sets out to right that

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<sup>1</sup> See Hubbard (1991: 106–11) for the double identity of the chorus in the parabasis proper and in these songs.

wrong.<sup>2</sup> The characterization of Athena as “charioteer of the aegis” is important in this regard because it evokes agonistic, epinician, associations that allow the poet to claim his own triumph under Athena’s tutelage. Technical skill is the hallmark of a successful charioteer, and skilled chariot driving is associated with heroes and prestigious victors in games. So it seems natural that the metaphor of a skilled chariot driver should be applied to other fields of endeavor, in particular to this comedy which is concerned to reassert its superiority over the competition.

As mentioned above, it is at times ambiguous whether the chorus invokes the gods as a chorus of nature deities or as a chorus of Athenian clouds. The chorus in the ode summons Zeus, Poseidon, Aether, and Helios (563–74), and in the antode four other deities, Apollo, Artemis, Athena, and Dionysos, to join its dance (595–606). In his commentary on the play Dover (1968: 172–3) notes that the chorus of the ode first summons Zeus and Poseidon from the perspective of a comic chorus at the festival and then momentarily shifts to sing as a chorus of nature deities to Aether and Helios. Scodel (1987: 334–5) questions whether the personality of the chorus of the ode shifts, and argues that the perspective of the chorus is consistently that of goddesses of nature. I propose a combination of these viewpoints; that is, the status of the chorus of the ode is ambiguous precisely because it can invoke Zeus and Poseidon from the perspective of clouds or of a comic chorus at the festival: Zeus is honored as supreme by gods and mortals, and Poseidon, as god of the sea and earth quake, may be seen both from the perspective of clouds as deities of nature and from the view point of human worshippers. This same dual perspective applies to the next two gods in this ode: Aether can be considered the father of the cloud deities but also of mortals, since in the next line he is referred to as the “life-supporter of all” (βιοθρέμμονα πάντων, 570) and Helios is said to be a great divine being among gods and mortals (μέγας ἐν θεοῖς / ἐν θνητοῖσιν τε δαίμων, 573–4).

There is less ambiguity about the perspective of the chorus in the antode. Each of the four gods the chorus invokes, Apollo, Artemis, Athena and Dionysos, is associated with well-known cult places and particular localities. These four invocations are exact metrical echoes of the four invocations of the ode and here stress the perspective of human

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<sup>2</sup> Lines 518–26 allude directly to the defeat of the first version of the comedy. Cf. lines 575–9, where the clouds complain that their value has not been appreciated by the audience (Hubbard 1991: 109).

worshippers.<sup>3</sup> Of special interest is the summoning of Aether as “our father” (ἡμέτερον πατέρ’, 569) in the ode, and in the antode of Athena as “our native goddess” (ἢ τ’ ἐπιχώριος ἡμετέρα θεός, 601).<sup>4</sup> As Scodel observes (1987: 335), “if Aether can be ‘our father’ only to the clouds, Athena is ‘our goddess’ only to the Athenians.” Thus the personality of the chorus here expresses itself not as “clouds,” but as human worshippers, and what is more, as worshippers of their own native goddess at Athens.

The identification of the chorus as worshippers of Athena at Athens is significant because it allows Aristophanes to allude to a central topic of the parabasis, namely the claim of the poet to deserve victory in this version of the play. The invocation of πολιοῦχος (602), a poetic synonym for Athena Polias, would be familiar to the audience from dedicatory inscriptions on the acropolis.<sup>5</sup> As the goddess who is both native to (ἐπιχώριος) and patron resident of Athens, she has a special relationship with the chorus — further emphasized by her name at the end of a period after a series of epithets.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, if we may judge from the invocation of Athena πολιοῦχος in the antode of *Knights*, produced the year before the original *Clouds*, she is the “mistress of warriors and poets,” and “partisan of choral songs” (581–90).<sup>7</sup> If Athena πολιοῦχος is associated with poetry and dance in the song of *Knights*, then she may

<sup>3</sup> Parker 1997: 194–6; Zimmermann 1985: 210–12. For the metrical and structural similarities of the ode and antode of *Clouds* to cult-poetry, see Fraenkel 1962: 196–8.

<sup>4</sup> This appears to be the single extant use of ἐπιχώριος with a deity (cf. *LSJ* s.v.).

<sup>5</sup> *IG* i<sup>3</sup> 544 (= *CEG* 1, 282, bronze pomegranate, ca. 550 B.C.?); *IG* i<sup>3</sup> 683 (= *CEG* 1, 198, column dedication, ca. 510–500 B.C.?); *IG* i<sup>3</sup> 718 (= *CEG* 1, 235, column dedication, ca. 500–480 B.C.?); *IG* i<sup>3</sup> 775 (= *CEG* 1, 296, clay cup, ante 480 B.C.).

<sup>6</sup> Whether Athena has the shortest section of the four deities of the song and whether she is placed emphatically at start or conclusion of the song is beside the point. Cf. Zimmermann who notes that Athena and Dionysos are the only deities to receive this attention in the odes (1985: 211).

<sup>7</sup> Aristophanes also invokes Athena as πολιοῦχος at *Lys.* 345 (the female chorus invites her to be its ally against the male intruders); *Thesm.* 318–19, πόλιν / οἰκοῦσα (the chorus of celebrants alludes to her contest with Poseidon for the patronage of Attica), and again at 1136–40, ἢ πόλιν ἡμετέραν ἔχει (the chorus calls Athena to the dance); *Av.* 31 (the chorus leader asks who will be the new city’s guardian). Cf. Anderson 1995: 10–14; 44–7; 58–62.

be expected to retain that interest. The poet reuses a motif for a similar purpose here. This association is further stressed by the strong metrical resemblance between these two parabolic songs, and has significance in *Clouds*, a play concerned with poetic victory.<sup>8</sup>

What is especially important for our purposes is an aspect of Athena related to the epinician tradition, as can be seen in the summons of the goddess as “charioteer of the aegis” (αἰγίδος ἠνίοχος). “Charioteer of the aegis” is a striking expression, unattested elsewhere in connection with Athena. The aegis, as Athena’s preeminent instrument of terror, brings to mind her awesome power, speed, and invincibility on the field of battle.<sup>9</sup> Dover (1968: ad 602) suggests that the goddess advances by flapping the aegis. This image may be open to question, but what is certain is Athena’s expertise as she guides her aegis to victory. As mentioned at the outset, chariot driving requires technical skill and the metaphor of the poet as charioteer of his song is a familiar one from epinician. We may recall that Pindar “hopes to spread the victor’s fame with his swift chariot of song” (*Ol.* 1, 108–12), and that he “yokes his chariot of song in praise of victorious deeds” (*Nem.* 1, 1–7).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Aristophanes draws on the charioteer metaphor to characterize and celebrate his success with *Knights*, boasting of driving his own team of Muses rather than the team of another to dramatic victory (*Vesp.* 1021–2).<sup>11</sup>

One might object that there is nothing explicit in the text to justify linking Athena as “charioteer of the aegis” with the poet’s creative

<sup>8</sup> For the resemblances between the songs of *Knights* (551–64; 581–94) and *Clouds* (563–74; 595–606), see Fraenkel 1962: 191–201; Zimmermann 1985: 210–11; Parker 1997: 168, 194–6.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hes. fr. 343.18 M-W (the aegis is described as “great terror of armies,” αἰγίδα φοβέστρατον); Hom. *Il.* 5, 733–42 (Athena flings the aegis on her shoulders as she prepares for battle); *Od.* 22, 297–301 (Athena routs the suitors with her aegis); Aesch. *Eum.* 404 (Athena’s aegis whistles noisily as she flies to Athens).

<sup>10</sup> Pind. *Ol.* 9, 80–2 (the poet drives the “chariot of the Muses”); *Isthm.* 2, 1 (“chariot of the golden wreath Muses”), 8, 61–3 (“the chariot of the Muses speeds forward”); cf. Simpson, 1969: 437–41, 461–73.

<sup>11</sup> The Chorus leader declares in the parabasis, οὐκ ἄλλοτρίων ἀλλ’ οἰκείων μουσῶν στόμαθ’ ἠνιοχήσας (*Vesp.* 1022). The same metaphor is used at the end of the parabasis to allude to the defeat of the original version of *Clouds*: ὁ δὲ ποιητῆς οὐδὲν χείρων παρὰ τοῖσι σοφοῖς νενόμισται / εἰ παρελαύνων τοὺς ἀντιπάλους τὴν ἐπίνοιαν ξυνέτριψεν (*Vesp.* 1049–50).

activity. While there is no direct connection in the text, the juxtaposition of the poet's concern with his artistic ability and the epinician imagery is very suggestive, especially since Athena of Athens, as I have noted, has an abiding interest in poets and choruses.<sup>12</sup> In a comedy imbued with claims of artistic innovation, at least in Aristophanes' imagination (cf. 547–8), and intent on poetic transcendence and dramatic victory, the chariot metaphor, expressed for the goddess, implied for her favorite comic poet, seems ideally suited for the occasion. Indeed, poetic interest and activity is characteristic of all the gods of the antode. Apollo is the god of music and poetry, as the formulaic ἀμφί μοι ... ἄναξ, reminds us (595);<sup>13</sup> Artemis is the goddess of dance, here celebrated by Lydian maidens (599–600); and Dionysos, recently called “nourisher” of the comic poet (519), is “reveler” and “light-bearer” at Delphi as well as god of the dramatic festival and patron of comedy itself as the title κωμαστήης (606) reminds us.<sup>14</sup>

If this interpretation is correct, we can see Aristophanes' skillful use of the ambiguous nature of the chorus of clouds and the deities they invoke to allude to one of the central messages of the parabasis: that he deserves victory. Athena is the “charioteer of the aegis” because she will prevail—the question is over what? The obvious answer is the new education with its harmful implications for Athenian society. But it also seems likely that the poet allusively returns to the theme that began the parabasis—that his play deserves first prize. The patron goddess of the city wields her aegis, bringing victory to the individuals who invoke her, namely, the clouds, not just in their role as characters in the play, but as *Clouds*, or the play itself, and in so doing she implicitly brings along a passenger, the poet, who shares in her victory. Athena's triumph is also his triumph. The judges may have failed in their decision, but

<sup>12</sup> Cf. also *Thesm.* 1136, where the chorus of celebrants invites Pallas Athena “lover of the chorus” (φιλόχορον) to join the dance.

<sup>13</sup> According to Σ<sup>RVE</sup> on Ar. *Nub.* 595, a poem of Terpander began ἀμφί μοι αὔτις (αὔτε) ἄνακτα (*PMG* 697); and according to Σ<sup>E</sup>, dithyrambic poets were called ἀμφιάνακτες because they used the formula ἀμφί μοι at the beginning of their songs; hence ἀμφιανακτίζειν, “to sing dithyrambic hymns,” Cratin. *PCG* iv. 72. Cf. *Hymn. Hom. Pan* 1; Eur. *Tro.* 511.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Dover (1968: ad loc). In this context, I believe, the association of Dionysos—further stressed by his name (like Athena's) at the end of a period after a run of epithets—with revelers (κῶμοι) who take to the streets after symposia is secondary to his association with and patronage of the theater.

Aristophanes asserts through the epithets of various deities linked with artistry, and especially with the characterization of Athena, the excellence of his comedy.

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