

## *Para Prosdokian* and the Comic Bit in Aristophanes

Over the past few decades, our understanding of how humor operates in ancient Greek comedy has improved dramatically. One strand of scholarship applies modern humor theory to the study of Aristophanes, focusing on the mechanics of the joke (Ruffell 2011). A second strand of scholarship studies larger topics related to humor such as laughter (Halliwell 2008), nonsense (Kidd 2014), parody (Farmer 2017), and surprise (Kanellakis 2020). However, there remains a gap in the literature for research that blends these two strands of scholarship—the small-scale analysis of individual jokes and the large-scale analysis of the wider context of humor. This paper adds to the conversation by investigating the *para prosdokian* “contrary to expectation” joke and how it relates to larger units of humor that I term *comic bits*. After analyzing some problems I see with Kanellakis’s (2020) recent account of *para prosdokian*, I show how *para prosdokian* jokes contribute to comic bits in such a way that Kanellakis’s theory cannot account for.

*Para prosdokian*, according to Sommerstein (2019), is “a comic device consisting in the substitution, for a word or phrase that the audience had been led by the context to expect, of an entirely different word or phrase. The substituted expression normally makes sense in context, but a sense quite unlike the one that had been expected, and the surprise effect is calculated to excite laughter.” This establishment and subsequent subversion of expectations appears in both modern examples such as Henny Youngman’s “Take my wife—please!” and ancient examples such as Aristophanes’s “Now listen, give me your undivided—bellies” (*Acharnians* 733). Kanellakis suggests that many ancient and modern explanations of *para prosdokian* overlook some important internal context (either verbal, literary, scenic, and cultural) that makes the

proposed example of *para prosdokian* not surprising and not contrary to expectation; as a result, the proposed example would not actually qualify as a true *para prosdokian*. One example: in *Women at the Thesmophoria*, Critylla opens the women's assembly with a parody of a standard Athenian curse, "If anyone conspires in any way to harm the *demos* of the women..." (*Thesm.* 335-336); here Critylla says "of the women" instead of the expected "of the Athenians", the phrase that appears in the actual curse. On Kanellakis's view, this would not count as *para prosdokian* because Aristophanes had already established that there would be an assembly of women, and jokes about women would not be unexpected. This prioritization of the internal context, I submit, leads to problematic consequences: (1) something considered to be *para prosdokian* in the outside world would lose its status as a *para prosdokian* once embedded within a play, so long as the play contained some previous reference to the topic of the joke, and (2) *para prosdokian* jokes cannot possibly exist within larger scenes, if they have anything to do with the topic or content of that scene. By eliminating these cases as *para prosdokian* jokes, we eliminate the extra comic dimensions afforded by these jokes and devalue the literary choices Aristophanes is making.

I suggest that *para prosdokian* should be understood as subverting only those expectations that are external to the play; consequently, jokes such as *Thesm.* 335-336 would still count as *para prosdokian*. Furthermore, I argue that it is of pivotal importance that these jokes cohere with the internal expectations of the play since this allows them to contribute to the development of the humor in comic bits. (I define a comic bit as a unit of comedy based on some central premise, where the humor revolving around that central premise develops over the course of the bit.). From the premise of the bit in *Women at the Thesmophoria*, various associations emerge (politics, religion, gender, tragedy), and the *para prosdokian* joke combines two of these

strands (gender, politics) in ways that escalates the humor overall. By analyzing these jokes through the lens of the comic bit, new interpretive possibilities emerge—*para prosdokian* jokes can weave together comic associations arising from the bit’s premise in new and exciting ways, incorporate other sources of humor such as obscenity or sexuality, and contribute to the narrative plot of the play or even larger extra-dramatic discourses. These are no mere jokes, but important components of Aristophanes’s comedy that highlight his artistic skill and dramatic technique.

### Bibliography

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