

13 The informal oath

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13.1 How informal oaths are used

For the purposes of this book, an “informal oath” is defined as an oath which meets both the following specifications:

- (a) The sole linguistic marker is the presence of a phrase consisting of an affirmative or negative particle (in Attic $\nu\alpha\iota$ $\mu\acute{\alpha}$, $\nu\eta$, $\omicron\upsilon$ $\mu\acute{\alpha}$, or $\mu\acute{\alpha}$; for the equivalents in other dialects, see §5.1, pp. 80–1) followed by the name of a god, hero, or *Eideshort* in the accusative case¹ (with or without a definite article),² or alternatively (in Boeotian dialect) $\imath\tau\tau\omega$ followed by the name of a god or hero in the nominative.
- (b) The oath occurs in a prose text or in one of the less elevated poetic genres such as satyr-drama, comedy, elegy or iambus (for oaths of the same form in epic, lyric and tragedy, see §5.1, pp. 81–3), or in an inscription of informal nature.³

These oaths are very unevenly distributed in our data. The following table shows their frequency in texts of various kinds in our period. In the case of satyr-drama the figures are necessarily approximate, since it is often uncertain whether a quoted fragment comes from a satyr-play or a tragedy, particularly when the quoting author does not name the play. In the case of some of the better-preserved authors, an approximate figure is given for the total surviving wordage of that author’s works⁴ and for the frequency of informal oaths per thousand words.

1 Or by a plural or dual expression meaning “the gods”.

2 If the god sworn by is Zeus, the article is optional; everywhere else it is normally obligatory. Apart from a series of comic passages (Ar. *Birds* 194; Antiphanes fr. 288; Timocles fr. 41) which all seem to be quoting or parodying a tragic line (*trag. adesp.* 123a), there is only a single exception, among passages meeting the above definition of informal oaths – in Plato’s *Symposium* (219c), where Alcibiades swears $\mu\acute{\alpha}$ $\theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$, $\mu\acute{\alpha}$ $\theta\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ that his attempt to carry out a reverse seduction of Socrates had proved an abject failure. This formula occurs nowhere else in Greek literature, but the shorter forms $\mu\acute{\alpha}$ $\theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ and $\nu\eta$ $\theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ appear in a fourth-century lyric poem of elevated style if not of elevated subject, the *Banquet* of Philoxenus of Leucas (PMG 836b.20), and occasionally in Hellenistic and Imperial texts of various kinds (Herodas 7.99; *Anth.Pal.* 7.351.7 [Dioscorides], 12.48.2 [Meleager]; Plutarch, *Aratus* 23.6, citing a saying of Persaeus the Stoic datable to 243 BC; Aristaeetus, *Letter* 1.4.4; Julian, *Against Heraclius the Cynic* 9.25 and *Misopogon* 22.2). They are likely to be poetic in origin.

3 The known examples are *IG* i³ 1361 (gravestone for a woodcutter), xii(3) 536 (rock-cut erotic graffito), *SEG* 29.77 (“speech-bubble” on vase painting), 36.114 (cup graffito).

4 These figures are based on those given in *TLG*; that for Hypereides includes the fragments of the speech *Against Diondas* published by Carey et al. 2008 from the Archimedes palimpsest.

| | Wordage (thousands) | Informal oaths | Per 1000 words |
|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Satyr-drama | | 7 | |
| Sophocles | | 1 | |
| Euripides | | 6 | |
| Comedy | | 682 | |
| Aristophanes | 110 | 589 | 5.35 |
| Epicharmus | | 6 | |
| Pseudepicharmea | | 1 | |
| Eupolis | | 11 | |
| Cratinus | | 2 | |
| Other Old Comedy | | 14 | |
| Antiphanes | | 15 | |
| Alexis | | 11 | |
| Other Middle Comedy | | 25 | |
| Anonymous fragments | | 3 | |
| Elegy and iambus | | 4 | |
| Theognis | | 1 | |
| Ananias | | 1 | |
| Anonymous fragments | | 2 | |
| Oratory | | 248 | |
| Antiphon ⁵ | 22 | 2 | 0.11 |
| Andocides ⁶ | 18 | 1 | 0.06 |
| Lysias ⁷ | 64 | 4 | 0.06 |
| Isocrates | 125 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Isaeus | 33 | 11 | 0.33 |
| Demosthenes ⁸ | 309 | 196 | 0.63 |

⁵ Both of Antiphon's informal oaths are in fragmentary works; none is in the three speeches preserved complete or in the *Tetralogies*.

⁶ The one instance occurs in a political speech (3.15), and is an early example of the use of $\nu\eta$ $\Delta\iota\alpha$ to introduce words attributed to an imaginary opponent (see ch. 9, pp. 233–7).

⁷ There are no informal oaths in lawcourt speeches written by Lysias himself. Three are found in the speech *Against Andocides* (Lysias 6), which is certainly by another (though contemporary) hand, and the fourth is in the strange speech *Against Fellow Members of a Club* (Lysias 8), which may also be spurious and was in any case written for delivery (or as if for delivery) at a private meeting.

⁸ The figures for Demosthenes include six informal oaths in the seven speeches in the corpus (46, 47, 49, 50, 52, 53, 59) which are generally ascribed to Apollodorus son of Pasion (see Trevett

| | | | |
|---|-----|-------------|------|
| Aeschines | 46 | 21 | 0.46 |
| Hyperides | 22 | 6 | 0.27 |
| Lycurgus | 15 | 2 | 0.13 |
| Deinarchus | 19 | 5 | 0.26 |
| Philosophical dialogue | | 508 | |
| Plato ⁹ | 583 | 288 | 0.49 |
| Xenophon (dialogues) ¹⁰ | 72 | 219 | 3.04 |
| Antisthenes | | 1 | |
| History | | 17 | |
| Herodotus | 189 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Thucydides | 153 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Xenophon (Hell. & Anab.) ¹¹ | 126 | 17 | 0.14 |
| All others | | 0 | |
| Other prose | | 96 | |
| Xenophon (Cyropaedia &c.) ¹² | 119 | 93 | 0.78 |
| Anaximenes ¹³ | | 1 | |
| Aristotle ¹⁴ | | 2 | |
| All literary texts | | 1562 | |

1992, 50–76). These speeches contain about 30,000 words, so Apollodorus' frequency is only 0.20 per thousand words.

9 The frequency of informal oaths varies fairly widely among the dialogues, but in those generally acknowledged to be late (*Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, *Cratylus*, *Laws*, *Epinomis*) it drops off drastically; these eight works, with some 213,000 words, contain only eight informal oaths (0.04 per thousand words), whereas no genuine dialogue outside the group has a frequency lower than 0.29 per thousand (*Symposium*). The dialogues generally regarded as spurious (*Alcibiades I and II*, *Hipparchus*, *Rivals*, *Theages*, *Hippias Major*, *Cleitophon*, *Minos*) have a markedly high frequency of informal oaths (fifty in 38,000 words, or 1.32 per thousand). If both these groups are disregarded, the average frequency for the genuine early and middle works is 0.69 per thousand.

10 The *Memorabilia*, *Oeconomicus*, *Symposium*, *Apology*, and *Hiero*.

11 All 17 informal oaths occur in the quoted words of characters (three of them in speeches by Xenophon himself in the *Anabasis*).

12 This covers all works in the Xenophontine corpus not included under "Philosophical dialogue" or "History". Of the 93 informal oaths, all but two occur in the *Cyropaedia*: there is one in the indignant fourteenth chapter of the *Lacedaemonian Constitution*, and one in a quoted remark in *Agesilaus* (5.5.6). The ratio for the *Cyropaedia* is 1.13 per thousand, for the other works 0.05.

13 The one informal oath in the so-called *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* comes from a snatch of imaginary dialogue in an imaginary court case.

14 Both of Aristotle's informal oaths are in the *Politics*.

It is clear from this evidence that the informal oath is overwhelmingly a conversational phenomenon. Its natural home is in the literary genres that imitate conversation – comedy (and, to a limited extent, satyr-drama), dialogue (especially the dialogues of Xenophon, which rarely slip, as Plato's so often do, from colloquy into exposition), and reported conversations in narrative works (though, as was noted in §5.1 [pp. 80–1 n.18], they are entirely avoided in Herodotus, who often reports conversations, just as much as in Thucydides who hardly ever does). In oratory, these oaths first make a significant appearance in Isaeus, and remain relatively frequent in orators of the next generation, especially Demosthenes;¹⁵ they are particularly common in political (as opposed to forensic) speeches (43 in 46,000 words, or 0.97 per thousand). In all other forms of literature informal oaths are very rare.

In all genres, except where our sample is very small, the overwhelming majority of informal oaths invoke the name of Zeus. The greatest variety is found in comedy, where we find oaths by the following powers: Aglaurus (1), Aphrodite (15), Apollo (31), Artemis (10), Asclepius (1), Athena (1),¹⁶ Castor (1), Demeter (25), Demeter and Kore (“the two goddesses”) (20), Diocles (an Eleusinian and Megarian hero) (1), Dionysus (16), Ge (6), “the gods” (27),¹⁷ the Graces (1), Hecate (8), Helios (1), Hephaestus (1), Heracles (5), Hermes (7), Hestia (2), Kore (1), the Nymphs (1), Pandrosus (1), Poseidon (28), the Twin Gods¹⁸ (12), Uranus or Heaven (8), multiple gods (10),¹⁹ unspecified (1),²⁰ non-divine objects (11),²¹ making a total of 253 or 37% of all informal oaths in comedy.

In other genres the figures are as follows:

15 The orators often use *νῆ Δία* to introduce the words of an imaginary opponent; for this technique see ch. 9.

16 Remarkably rare, particularly in comparison with the usage of the orators. Was it deliberately avoided? In the only instance (Ar. *Peace* 218) the speaker is another god (Hermes), not speaking in his own name but quoting the words of a typical Athenian on a past occasion.

17 Including one oath by “the twelve gods” (Ar. *Knights* 235), and one by “the gods and goddesses” (Anaxandrides fr. 2).

18 Castor and Pollux (when used by Spartans) or Amphion and Zethus (when used by Thebans).

19 Some of these are combinations like those found in the orators (Zeus and the gods; Zeus and Athena; Zeus, Apollo and Demeter; Athena and the gods); three are quotations or parodies of the tragic (or satyric) line *μὰ γῆν, μὰ κρήνας, μὰ ποταμούς, μὰ νάματα* (trag. *adesp.* 123a). Socrates is made to swear by a trinity of scientific “deities” (Ar. *Clouds* 627).

20 *μὰ τόν* (Ar. *Frogs* 1374).

21 Air (Ar. *Clouds* 667), the almond tree (Eupolis fr. 79), the battle of Marathon (Eupolis fr. 106), cabbages (three times), the coming day (Ar. *Eccl.* 105), the dog (Ar. *Wasps* 83), the kestrels (Ar. *Birds* 1335). Paphlagon-Cleon is made to swear by the privileged seating (*proedria*) that he was

Orators: Athena (4), Demeter (2), Dionysus (1), “the gods” (36),²² Heracles (4), Poseidon (1), multiple gods (23),²³ the heroic dead (1);²⁴ total 72, or 29% of all informal oaths in these authors.

Xenophon: Apollo (1),²⁵ “the gods” (16), Hera (12 or 13),²⁶ Mithras (1 – a Persian), the Twin Gods (2 – both Spartans); total 32 or 33, making 10% of all informal oaths in Xenophon.

Plato: Ammon (1),²⁷ the Dog (14),²⁸ “the gods” (17),²⁹ Hera (7),³⁰ Poseidon (1),³¹ Zethus (1),³² unspecified (1);³³ total 42, making 15% of all informal oaths in Plato.

Satyr-drama: none.³⁴

Other poetry: Cadmilus (1);³⁵ non-divine objects (2).³⁶ All three are in iambic verse – two of them certainly, and the third possibly, in choliambics, the less dignified variant of a verse-form that was not considered very dignified in any case.

awarded after his victory at Pylos (Ar. *Knights* 702), and the Sausage-seller by the punches and knife-slashes he suffered as a boy (*ibid.* 411–2). On oaths of this type generally, see §5.3.

22 Including three oaths by “the gods and goddesses” and one by “all the Olympian gods”.

23 The most frequent combinations are “Zeus and the gods” (12) and “Zeus and Apollo” (6); others are Zeus-Apollo-Athena (2), Zeus-Apollo-Demeter (2), and “Heracles and the gods” (1). It is striking that Apollo, who in comedy figures alone in informal oaths more often than any other god except Zeus, never does so at all in the orators.

24 In Dem. 18.206–8, quoted at the end of this chapter.

25 *Symp.* 4.27; the speaker is Charmides.

26 On eight of these occasions the speaker is Socrates, and on two more it is another member of his deme of Alopeke; see the Appendix to this section.

27 *Politicus* 257b; the speaker is Theodorus of Cyrene, near which Ammon’s famous oracle was located, and he describes Ammon as the god of his country (τὸν ἡμέτερον θεόν).

28 The speaker is invariably Socrates; see §5.3.

29 Once “gods and goddesses” (*Symp.* 219c, spoken by Alcibiades); see above, p. 315 n. 2.

30 On six of these occasions the speaker is Socrates, and on the seventh (*Laches* 181a) it is another member of the Alopeke deme; see the Appendix to this section.

31 *Symp.* 214d; the speaker is Alcibiades.

32 Zethus, together with his brother Amphion, built the walls of Thebes. The speaker, Socrates, himself explains that he is alluding to Callicles’ exploitation of a speech by Zethus in Euripides’ *Antiope* to condemn Socrates and philosophy (*Gorgias* 484e–485d).

33 μὰ τόν (*Gorgias* 466e).

34 The extremely elaborate oath by Poseidon and six other powers associated with the sea which Silenus uses to affirm (falsely) that he was not trying to sell the Cyclops’ property to Odysseus and his companions (Eur. *Cycl.* 262–9) is not an “informal” oath, since it includes a verb of swearing (ἀπώμωσ’ 266) and an explicit imprecation against the swearer’s children (268–9).

35 Hipponax fr. 155b West. Cadmilus or Casmilus was a divinity (sometimes identified with Hermes) associated with (according to some, one of) the “Great Gods” (Cabeiri) of Samothrace; see Acusilaus fr. 20 Fowler, Nonnus 4.88, Σ Ap.Rh. 1.917, Σ Lycophron 162, 219.

36 Cabbage (Ananius fr. 4) and poppy leaves (*iamb. adesp.* 57).

Other prose: “the gods” (1).³⁷

Inscriptions: Apollo (1), Heracles (1).

In literary texts of all kinds there are thus 403 or 404 informal oaths which are not simply “by Zeus”, amounting to 26% of the total number of informal oaths; the most common of such oaths are those by “the gods” (97), Apollo (32) and Poseidon (30), but all the major Olympians are represented with the exception of Ares, as are many other gods, some heroes, a number of non-divine objects, and even an aposiopesis (μὰ τόν). Frequently (33 times), especially in the orators, two or more gods would be invoked in a single oath; on 26 of these occasions (79%) Zeus is among the gods named.

As has sometimes been noted above, informal oaths can make handy markers of ethnicity. We almost always see this phenomenon from the Athenian point of view, so we do not know whether there was a stereotypical oath by which other Greeks identified Athenians in their literature or their jokes. But we find Spartans swearing by their “Twin Gods”, Castor and Pollux, usually in the easily recognizable form *ναὶ τὸ σιώ*, or occasionally by Castor alone; Thebans by their own twin gods, Amphion and Zethus, or by Heracles (a native of Thebes) and his nephew and assistant Iolaus, or with the heavily dialect-marked formula *ἴττω Δεύς*; a Megarian by the local hero Diocles, a Cyrenaean by Ammon, a Persian by Mithras, and perhaps a Sybarite woman by Kore³⁸ (Ar. *Wasps* 1438).

Much richer, though only from comedy, is the evidence for gender differentiation in the use of informal oaths. Of the gods and goddesses invoked in comic oaths, the great majority are used either by men only or by women only, though a few (including the ubiquitous Zeus) are available to both.³⁹ The patterns are as follows:⁴⁰

³⁷ [Arist.] *Rhet. ad Alex.* 15.7.2–3.

³⁸ “Perhaps”, because although the Doric dialect form (*ναὶ τὰν Κόραν*) is appropriate for a Sybarite, the choice of Kore as the oath-goddess may merely be appropriate for a woman. It is striking, however, that the other two instances in which Kore alone is invoked in oaths are also in non-Attic dialects. In Epicrates fr. 8 the speaker is quoting the words of a procuress who swore by *τὰν Κόραν, τὰν Ἀρτεμιν, τὰν Φερρέφατταν* that the girl she was apparently trying to palm off on him was a virgin (she was evidently flustered enough to forget that Kore and Pherrephatta were one and the same). In Herodas 1.32 (*οὐ μὰ τὴν Αἰδεω Κούρην*) the speaker (location uncertain, but most likely in a city of Asia Minor or the Aegean islands under Ptolemaic rule) uses an artificial and slightly inaccurate form of Ionic based on the language of Hipponax.

³⁹ For discussion of these phenomena in the broader context of differences in the language used in speech by, and in speaking to, males and females in Attic Greek, see Sommerstein 2009, 18–21 (first published 1995).

⁴⁰ One or two deities are omitted from the table because no passage survives in which the gender of the speaker is clear: Hestia (Eubulus fr. 60, Antiphanes fr. 183), the Nymphs (Eupolis fr. 84).

| | Gods | Goddesses |
|--------------------|---|---|
| Exclusively male | Dionysus “The gods” ⁴¹ Helios Hephaestus Heracles Hermes Poseidon Uranus (Heaven) | Athena Demeter ⁴² Ge Graces ⁴³ [Hera] ⁴⁴ |
| Exclusively female | | Aglaurus Aphrodite ⁴⁵ Artemis Demeter and Kore Hecate Kore Pandrosus |
| Open to both sexes | Apollo ⁴⁶ Castor and Pollux (Spartan) Zeus ⁴⁷ | |

⁴¹ In New Comedy (i.e., probably, in the early Hellenistic period) there are two possible instances of a woman swearing thus: Menander, *Dis Exapaton* 95 (where, however, the speaker is a man imagining what a woman will say to herself, and *may* have got the oath wrong) and *com. adesp.* 11174 (where it is likely, but not certain, that the speaker is the Philotis who was addressed in the previous line).

⁴² That is, Demeter *alone*, without her daughter. By the second half of the fourth century, however, Demeter could be invoked by women (Antiphanes fr. 26; Philippides fr. 5; Men. *Epitr.* 955), though the formula they used was always νή (μᾶ) τὴν φίλην Δήμητρα.

⁴³ This, however, occurs only once (Ar. *Clouds* 773).

⁴⁴ Oaths by Hera are not found in comedy; for their use (always by men) in Socratic literature, see the Appendix to this section. In tragedy (where, by definition, such oaths are not “informal”), they appear to be used only by women (*ibid.*)

⁴⁵ Used by a man in Ar. *Thesm.* 254; but this is an exception that proves the rule, since he is at that moment donning a woman’s garment.

⁴⁶ This oath is often claimed to be exclusively male, but it is used by a woman in Ar. *Lys.* 917 and probably also at *Frogs* 508; see Sommerstein 2009, 19–20 n.18 (first published 1995).

⁴⁷ In Menander, women’s oaths by Zeus, though they still occur, have become relatively rare: in the eighteen best preserved plays we find only *Georg.* 34, *Perik.* 757 and possibly, in an emphatic form (μὰ τὸν εὐμένεοῦ[ν]τ]α μ[οι Διά], see Römer 2012, 118–20; *contra*, Furley 2013, 87–90), *Epitr.* 819.

This body of data may be said to show three basic patterns.

- (1) There is an almost complete separation between the oaths proper to men and those proper to women. Indeed, by the time of Menander, only the oath by Zeus remains “unisex”, and even that has become rare in the mouths of women (see note 47). Already in Aristophanes it is overwhelmingly men who swear by Apollo, and in his *Ecclesiazusae* (155–60) a woman, practising a speech she intends to make while disguised as a man, and ordered to correct a feminine oath (by Demeter and Kore) to a masculine one, substitutes an oath by Apollo. The Spartan oath by Castor and Pollux may be regarded as an exception that proves the rule: it is most unlikely that Aristophanes or most members of his audience had conversed with Spartan women or knew how they spoke,⁴⁸ and since he thus had no linguistic stereotype of the Spartan woman he simply used the same Spartan stereotype for both sexes. From about the middle of the fourth century both sexes could swear by Demeter, but they used different formulae (see note 42).
- (2) With the exceptions already noted, oaths by male gods are used exclusively by men.
- (3) Oaths by goddesses are usually in comedy reserved for women, but there are important exceptions, especially Athena, Demeter (when named alone) and Ge. One can only guess why these oaths were considered masculine. Athena was of course a particularly male-oriented goddess, indeed a warrior, and will certainly have been invoked in oaths of office taken on the Acropolis by the highest officials of the state.⁴⁹ Demeter too was named in official oaths taken by men, notably that of the jurors.⁵⁰ But one can think of no plausible reason why Ge, traditionally the oldest of all gendered beings whatsoever, should be a divinity for men alone to swear by; and it may reasonably be suspected that chance and arbitrary habit played a considerable role in determining what was permitted and what forbidden in this area.

In two comedies of Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Ecclesiazusae*, characters disguise themselves as members of the opposite sex. In *Thesmophoriazusae* the elderly in-law of Euripides (nameless in the text itself, but labelled Mnesilochus in the scholia and in marginal speaker-indications) is dressed up

⁴⁸ Nor could he learn this from literature, since there was no Spartan poetry (or at least none in general circulation) of a kind that would be likely to contain informal oaths typical of ordinary conversation and placed in the mouths of women.

⁴⁹ Cf. [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 55.5 (the nine archons).

⁵⁰ Cf. the text of this oath cited in Dem. 24.151 (see S&B §5.4).

as a woman in order to infiltrate the all-female festival of the Thesmophoria, and does so successfully until he is unmasked⁵¹ (279–651). In *Ecclesiazusae* the heroine, Praxagora, and a large number of other women (including the chorus of the play) disguise themselves as men, with false beards, to gain entrance to an Assembly meeting; the meeting itself takes place offstage, but there is an onstage dress rehearsal (129–240), the women depart for the Pnyx singing “like old men from the countryside” (285–310, cf. 277–9), and on the way back they keep up the masquerade until they are sure it is safe to end it (478–503). In a strongly gender-marked language it is always a challenging task to speak like a member of the other sex, and it is not surprising to find informal oaths being used to highlight competent or incompetent masquerading.

Euripides’ in-law in *Thesmophoriazusae* gets away with it completely, until he is cornered as a result of a tip-off coming from outside. He says many things which the other women find very offensive, but always in language that a woman might use. For a long time he does not use any informal oaths at all, but just at the end of his major speech (517), and again in the course of a fierce quick-fire argument (569) he swears correctly by Artemis.⁵² In *Ecclesiazusae*, there is a marked contrast between Praxagora – the highly intelligent leader of the women, who moreover has been able to listen to many Assembly speeches when she lived on or close to the Pnyx as a refugee (243–4) – and her colleagues. In her speech of more than sixty lines at the dress rehearsal (170–240 – there are some interruptions) Praxagora plays safe by using no informal oaths whatever (and likewise manages to avoid using any gendered word to refer to herself). The other women, for their part, make all sorts of blunders: not only are they, in accordance with a standard comic stereotype about women, incapable of thinking for long about anything except drink (132–43, 153–5), but they swear by the Two Goddesses (155) and Aphrodite (189), and address the Assembly as “ladies” (165). They eventually learn enough to be able to interject appropriate short remarks in praise of the speaker (203, 213), but even after that they once refer to themselves in the feminine gender (297). It is not surprising that at the Assembly itself, as we are told by a man who

51 When he forgets that a woman would not urinate into the type of vessel called a (*h*)amis (633–4). He would not even have come under suspicion had not the women been warned that there was a spy in their midst (574–602); attention then quickly focuses on him because he is the only person present whom the others do not know (614).

52 He also appeals to (but does not swear by) the Two Goddesses (Demeter and Kore) when trying to persuade the women to disregard the report that their meeting has been infiltrated by a man (594). All his other informal oaths (552, 555, 567, 615, 623) are by Zeus, the “unisex” oath-god, who is also during the period of his masquerade invoked in informal oaths by two of the real women (609, 640).

was there, only Praxagora (“a good-looking, white-faced young man”) made a speech (427–54); neither she nor the other women aroused any suspicion.⁵³

One might expect that informal oaths would often be expressed on a “horses-for-courses” principle, with the god (or non-divine object) being chosen for its appropriateness to the speaker, the addressee or the subject-matter. This is so only to a limited extent.⁵⁴ Among divinities, the only one for whom such an effect can be found with any frequency is Aphrodite: of fifteen informal oaths by her in comedy, eight are uttered in a sexual or erotic context.⁵⁵ In addition, Socrates’ unusual oath by the Graces (Charites) in Ar. *Clouds* 773 may be designed to express his enthusiasm for Strepsiades’ ingenious (*kharien*) solution to the problem that had been posed to him;⁵⁶ and the oath by Dionysus in Ar. *Wasps* 1474 introduces a description of Philocleon’s *drunken* behaviour, which includes the performance of archaic *tragic dances*. Otherwise, all we find is a thin scattering of passages in which an informal oath names a god with whom the speaker⁵⁷ or the addressee⁵⁸ has some special association.

53 The meeting was unusually crowded, much to the annoyance of those who arrived after the quorum was filled and so did not get their attendance fee (380–93), but the men assumed that this was because of the exceptionally important business on the agenda (394–7) which could be expected to attract many who would not normally attend.

54 On at least two occasions in comedy informal oaths are used which are deliberately made highly *inappropriate* to the speaker or the situation: in Ar. *Birds* 1236–7, where Peisetaerus tells Iris that humans are in future to sacrifice to the birds “and not to Zeus, by Zeus!”, and *ibid.* 1614 where Poseidon, commenting on a speech by Peisetaerus, remarks “By Poseidon, that’s well said!” Compare also *com. adesp.* 1062.12 where Rhea, in a speech complaining about her husband Cronus’s habit of eating up his children (or rather of selling them and eating up the proceeds), emphasizes a statement with *μὰ τὸν Δί’* at a time when Zeus (the child who avoided being swallowed) cannot yet have been born! On “horses-for-courses” oaths more generally, see §6.1.

55 Ar. *Lys.* 554, 855–8, 939; *Thesm.* 254; *Eccl.* 981, 999–1000, 1008; *Wealth* 1067–9.

56 There are two passages in tragedy where an oath introduced by *νῆ* or *μὰ* names a divinity seemingly chosen for its appropriateness to the oath’s content. In Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (1431–6; see §5.3.2) Clytaemestra, shortly after murdering her husband (partly in revenge for his having sacrificed their daughter Iphigeneia), swears “by the fulfilled Justice that was due for my child, by Ruin and by the Fury, through whose aid I slew this man” that she has no fear (sc. of any counter-revenge) while she has the protection of her lover Aegisthus; and in Sophocles’ *Electra* (881–2) Chrysothemis, bringing the news of Orestes’ return from exile and finding that her sister Electra will not believe it, swears to its truth “by our father’s Hestia [or hearth]” – the goddess of the home of which Orestes is the rightful master (as already indicated by Clytaemestra’s dream, narrated earlier [417–23] by Chrysothemis to Electra, in which the hearth figured prominently).

57 Ar. *Clouds* 519 (Dionysus, whose nursing the poet claims to be); compare, in serious poetry, Eur. *IA* 948–54 (Nereus, the speaker’s maternal grandfather).

58 Eur. *Cycl.* 262–9 (Poseidon, the Cyclops’ father, and marine divinities and entities associated with him); Xenarchus fr. 9 (Dionysus – the addressee likes his wine strong); Pl. *Gorg.* 489e (the

There is a neat irony – unintended by the speaker – in the informal oath by Hermes at Ar. *Eccl.* 445. Blepyrus, commenting on Chremes’ report of an Assembly speech by an unknown young man (who was in fact Blepyrus’ wife Praxagora in disguise) in which it was said that women could be relied on to keep confidential information secret, whereas men serving on the Council were leaking secrets all the time, remarks “And, by Hermes, that was no lie he told!” Hermes, as we have seen (§7.3.3), was the divine patron of deception, a great liar and the archetypal tricky swearer – so at first sight it might seem inappropriate for him to be invoked to confirm a statement that someone was *not* lying; but the cream of the joke is that while the speaker may well have been telling the truth about the behaviour of Council members, he (or rather she) was getting away with a much bigger lie about her own identity – a lie, moreover, which was itself evidence of the *truth* of her statement that women were good at keeping secrets!

Non-divine entities invoked in informal oaths, being often chosen *ad hoc*, are proportionately more likely to have a contextual relevance (cf. §5.3.1), though the absolute number of instances is again small. In Aristophanes’ *Knights*, the Sausage-seller swears (411–13) that he will surpass his rival Paphlagon in shamelessness “by the fists whose blows I’ve borne many on many a time from a child up, and by the slashes of butchers’ knives” – in other words, by the gutter upbringing that has *made* him the shameless villain he is; and later Paphlagon affirms his superiority to the Sausage-seller by swearing “by the privileged seating that Pylos has won for me” that he will destroy him (702). In his *Ecclesiazusae* (105–8) Praxagora emphasizes her statement that the women’s objective in taking over the state is to save it from ruin by adding an informal oath “by the light of this dawning day” – the day on which the *coup d’état* is to take place, but also the metaphorical new light that it will bring to Athens.⁵⁹ Two characters in comedy swear by non-divine entities peculiarly appropriate to themselves: the Hoopoe (formerly Tereus) in Aristophanes’ *Birds* (194–5) swearing by “snares, traps and nets”, and Miltiades (returned from the underworld) in Eupolis’ *Demes* (fr. 106) swearing by “my battle at Marathon”.

Mention of Marathon appropriately leads us to perhaps the most sonorous and most noble of all the informal oaths in surviving Greek literature, one which

hero Zethus, recently quoted by the addressee, Callicles, in disparagement of philosophy); compare, in serious poetry, *Iliad* 1.86–91, where Achilles swears by Apollo to protect Apollo’s prophet Calchas against anyone, even Agamemnon (see §8.1, pp. 213–5)).

⁵⁹ A comparable passage in tragedy is Eur. *Hipp.* 304–10 where Phaedra’s nurse tells her mistress that if she insists on ending her life it will result in the disinheritance of her children, and swears this “by the horse-riding Amazon queen”, the (deceased) mother of their likely supplanter, Phaedra’s bastard stepson Hippolytus.

needs no commentary here⁶⁰ and with which this section may appropriately conclude.

If I were venturing to say that it was I who induced you to think thoughts worthy of your ancestors, every one of you would be entitled to resent it. But in fact I am only making plain to you your own preferences, and showing that our city upheld these principles even before my time; what I did was to take part in the service of applying them to particular situations. But this man [Aeschines] denounces the entire policy and urges you to be hostile to me because I have been responsible for bringing the city into fear and danger. He is keen to rob *me* of honour in the immediate present; but what he is actually doing is robbing *you* of praise that will endure for all future time. If you convict this man here [Ctesiphon] on the ground that my policy was not the best, you will be thought, not to have suffered what befell you through the harshness of fortune, but to have made a blunder. But there is no way, no way that it was a blunder, men of Athens, when you took it on yourselves to run risks on behalf of the freedom and safety of all, *I swear it by your ancestors who took the foremost place of danger at Marathon, and those who stood in the line at Plataea, and those who fought in the sea battles at Salamis and Artemisium, and the many other brave men who lie in the public tombs* – to all of whom alike, Aeschines, the city gave a public funeral, holding them worthy of the same honour, not just to those among them who were successful or victorious. (Demosthenes 18 [*On the Crown*] 206–8)

Appendix: swearing by Hera⁶¹

Both in Plato and in Xenophon, Socrates is represented as having the unusual habit of reinforcing some of his utterances with an informal oath by Hera. He does this six times in Plato⁶² and eight times in Xenophon;⁶³ as Dodds noted,⁶⁴ in Plato this oath “always accompanies expressions of admiration”, and with one exception (*Mem.* 1.5.4) this is true of the Xenophontic Socrates as well. We can safely assume that this was a habit of the historical Socrates – one that was imitated, indeed, by another of his pupils, Aeschines of Sphettus (D.L. 2.83). It was a very unusual one, and no convincing explanation of its origin has ever been given. Oaths of the form $\nu\eta\ \tau\eta\nu\ \text{Ἡραν}$ or $\mu\acute{\alpha}\ \tau\eta\nu\ \text{Ἡραν}$ are otherwise extremely

⁶⁰ Some remarks will be found in §5.3.3.

⁶¹ The following discussion is adapted from Sommerstein 2008b.

⁶² *Apol.* 24e; *Hipp.Maj.* 287a, 291e; *Gorg.* 449d; *Phdr.* 230b; *Tht.* 154d.

⁶³ *Mem.* 1.5.4, 3.10.9, 3.11.5, 4.2.9, 4.4.8; *Oec.* 10.1, 11.19; *Symp.* 4.54. In addition Xenophon makes Socrates, in reasserting his innocence after his condemnation, draw attention (*Apol.* 24) to the fact that “it has not been proved that I sacrifice to any new divinities, or swear by or recognize any other gods in place of Zeus and Hera and the gods associated with them”.

⁶⁴ Dodds 1959, 195 (on *Gorg.* 449e).

rare, occurring (as we shall see) only three times in all of Greek literature other than Plato and Xenophon;⁶⁵ with the exception of Ares, Hera is the only one of the thirteen principal divinities⁶⁶ who is never invoked in an oath in any surviving comic text or fragment⁶⁷ – an absence which I described, some years ago, as “a mystery ... [since] comedy ... is not deficient in expressions of admiration and wonderment”.⁶⁸

Was this just a personal mannerism of Socrates? Was he, as Dodds thought, adapting what was “normally a woman’s oath”,⁶⁹ and if so what might be the significance of this? Or was the oath by Hera, contrariwise, as Parker has claimed, a “male oath”⁷⁰ – as we have seen some other oaths by goddesses were, for example those by Athena and Demeter?

Now in Plato and Xenophon there are persons other than Socrates who swear by Hera – all of them, again, when expressing admiration. Four of these are characters in conversations also involving Socrates. They are Lysimachus, son of the famous Aristides, in Plato’s *Laches* (181a); Callias son of Hipponicus, and his brother Hermogenes, in Xenophon’s *Symposium* (4.45, 8.12); and, in the same work, Lycon, the father of Autolycus. Of these, only Hermogenes is ever regarded as a close associate of Socrates⁷¹ – Lysimachus, indeed, is portrayed as never having met him for many years⁷² – so they cannot be supposed to have all

65 In Eur. *IA* 739, however, Clytaemestra swears $\mu\alpha\ \tau\eta\nu\ \alpha\nu\alpha\sigma\sigma\alpha\nu\ \alpha\rho\gamma\epsilon\iota\alpha\nu\ \theta\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\nu$ (“by the Queen, the Argive goddess”, i.e. Hera), and we may therefore assume that in the oath $\mu\alpha\ \tau\eta\nu\ \alpha\nu\alpha\sigma\sigma\alpha\nu$ “by the Queen”, quoted by the Euripidean Hermione (*Andr.* 934) from the lips of her (Phthian) women friends, the $\alpha\nu\alpha\sigma\sigma\alpha$ is likewise Hera, an appropriate goddess for married women to invoke. *PMG* 960, where someone swears “by sceptre-bearing Hera who looks down from Olympus” that he/she has “a reliable guard-house on my tongue”, may well be tragic too – a female chorus assuring some hero(ine), possibly Procne in Sophocles’ *Tereus*, that they can be depended on to keep a secret; see Sommerstein 2010b and Sommerstein & Talbot 2012, 263–4.

66 That is, the Twelve Gods with the customary uncertainty as to whether Hestia should be reckoned as one of them (as in Pl. *Phdr.* 247a, where without her the gods number only eleven) or whether (as on the Parthenon frieze) Dionysus should take her place.

67 Parker 2005a, 270 n.2, ascribes the absence of this oath to metrical difficulties; but $\nu\eta\ \tau\eta\nu\ \text{Ἡραν}$, while unsuited to iambs, could easily appear in anapaestic tetrameters (of which there are nearly 1200 in the surviving plays of Aristophanes alone), and $\mu\alpha\ \tau\eta\nu\ \text{Ἡραν}$ fits perfectly into positions 3–6 of an iambic trimeter (the line would have no caesura, but none is needed in comedy).

68 Sommerstein 2009, 21 n.19 (first published 1995).

69 Dodds 1959, 195.

70 Parker 2005a, 270 n.2.

71 He was one of those who were with Socrates on the last day of his life (Pl. *Phd.* 59b) and is a dialogue participant in Plato’s *Cratylus*.

72 Cf. *Lach.* 180d–181a, 187d–e.

picked the habit up from him. Do they, then, have anything else in common with Socrates?

Three of them certainly do. Lysimachus, as he himself points out, was a member of the same Attic deme as Socrates⁷³ – that of Alopeke, located just outside the city walls to the south-east, across the Ilissus from the unfinished temple of Zeus Olympios;⁷⁴ so too, we happen to know, were Callias and Hermogenes. That, of course, does not necessarily mean that they *lived* in the deme; indeed, the homes of Socrates⁷⁵ and of Callias (the latter is the setting for Xenophon's *Symposium*, and also for Plato's *Protagoras*) were certainly within the city itself. However, it does mean that their recent forebears (Lysimachus' father; Socrates', Callias' and Hermogenes' paternal grandfathers) had lived in Alopeke in 508/7 BC, and that would not be too long ago for a linguistic habit once typical of the village to maintain itself among its former inhabitants and their descendants, particularly since these retained a strong corporate identity and met periodically at deme assemblies and festivals.⁷⁶

What of Lycon? We do not know for certain what deme he belonged to. Considerable confusion has been caused by the Platonic scholiast⁷⁷ who identified the father of Autolycus with Lycon of Thoricus, one of those who prosecuted Socrates in 399 BC. Storey (1985, 322–4) showed that this was merely an irresponsible guess and that Autolycus' father and Socrates' accuser must be different men; there is thus no evidence that Autolycus and his father belonged to the deme of Thoricus. There is equally, of course, no evidence that this Lycon was a member of any *other* particular deme, let alone that he was of Alopeke. And there is a ready alternative explanation for his use of the expression νῆ τὴν Ἥραν. By the time he uses it, he has heard other men at the party do so – Callias, Hermogenes and Socrates himself; and since the time when Callias first used this oath, no one else has used any oath-expression naming an individual god, except for the commonplace oaths by Zeus that peppered every Athenian conversation. Perhaps, then, we are meant to suppose that Lycon has noticed that νῆ τὴν Ἥραν seems to be in vogue as a formula for introducing expressions of admiration –

⁷³ *Lach.* 180d. Socrates' deme is named as Alopeke in Pl. *Gorg.* 495d; Aristides' in Plut. *Arist.* 1.1 and on the ostrakon *Ath.Agora* xxv 34; Callias' (and therefore Hermogenes' also) is known from a fourth-century inscription (*Ath.Agora* xix P26.455) naming a Ἰππώνικος Καλλίου Ἀλωπεκ., doubtless his son.

⁷⁴ See Traill 1974, 53.

⁷⁵ Who, according to Phaedrus in Pl. *Phdr.* 230d, never normally went beyond the city walls.

⁷⁶ Cf. Pl. *Lach.* 187e (which, admittedly, implies that Socrates as an adult had rarely if ever attended such gatherings), and see Whitehead 1986 (esp. 86–120, 176–222).

⁷⁷ Σ Pl. *Apol.* 23e.

and he duly follows this fashion. Alternatively (and perhaps preferably), he may simply be aping his very rich host Callias.

I suggest, therefore, that the habit of swearing by Hera, especially when expressing admiration, was essentially a local phenomenon characteristic of Alopeke (and perhaps, as we shall see, of one or two other demes in its immediate neighbourhood). It will have been well established in the village by the late sixth century, and maintained itself among the inhabitants and their descendants for at least the next hundred years.⁷⁸ Perhaps it became to some extent known to outsiders as a feature of Alopekean speech, which would explain how Plato and Xenophon managed, between them, to put it in the mouths of four Alopekeans (including Socrates) and only (at most) one member of any of Attica's 138 other demes; but it is also possible that it was perceived at the time merely as a peculiarity of particular individuals and families (such as those of Callias, who was a prominent public figure, and of Lysimachus, whose son Aristides, a one-time associate of Socrates,⁷⁹ will certainly have been known to Plato). Socrates, at any rate, used this oath-formula so frequently that it became strongly associated with him in particular, and from him it passed to some of his pupils and admirers who had no connection with his deme, such as Aeschines of Sphettus (as we have noted) and also Xenophon, who puts it into the mouth of at least one, and possibly two, characters in his *Cyropaedia*.⁸⁰ After that it disappears, to resurface only once, many centuries later, in a letter of Aristaenetus⁸¹.

Why Alopekeans in particular should have developed a tendency to swear by Hera we do not know. We do know, however, that this is not the only evidence that Hera enjoyed a special position in this deme. Hera was not, in general, a popular goddess in classical Athens,⁸² and her name is not in that period a common formative element for Athenian names. Sean Byrne's *Athenian Onomasticon*⁸³

78 But probably not all Alopekeans used it. Socrates' close friend Crito, and therefore also his son Critobulus, were members of the deme (Pl. *Apol.* 33d–e); the father appears frequently in Plato, the son in Xenophon, but neither is ever represented as swearing by Hera.

79 Pl. *Thet.* 150e–151a.

80 Xen. *Cyr.* 8.4.12, and perhaps also 1.4.12, where only one of the three main groups of mss. (y) reads μὰ τὴν Ἥραν, the rest having μὰ τὸν Δία: y is not uncommonly right alone, and the reading of the other families looks like a banalization, but on the other hand this would be the only passage in Plato or Xenophon in which Hera figures in a *negative* oath.

81 Aristaenetus *Epist.* 1.19.1.

82 "All the functions belonging to a poliadic deity which Hera exercises in Samos or Argos are swallowed up in Attica by Athena. None of the other optional extensions of Hera's powers seems here to have been made, either She is reduced to her smallest possible extent" (Parker 2005a, 441).

83 <http://www.seangb.org/> (updated 1 January 2014).

lists only five male Athenians living before 300 BC, and whose deme affiliation is known, bearing names that incorporate hers:⁸⁴ one each named Heracleitus (#21), Herodotus (#8), Herodorus (#4), Herotheus (#1) and Heroscamandrus (#2). And of these five, two come from Alopeke⁸⁵ and two more come from small demes (Diomeia and Otryne) which probably or possibly lay close to it.⁸⁶ Even leaving aside the latter pair, and given that Alopeke, which supplied ten of the 500 Athenian councillors,⁸⁷ may be presumed to have had about two per cent of the Athenian citizen population, it can be calculated that the odds against there being, by pure chance, two or more Alopekeans in a random sample of five Athenians are about 250 to one ($p = 0.004$).

We do not know what it was about the communities of this little patch of suburban Attica that made them take this special interest in Hera, but there must have been something. The most plausible speculation would be that Hera had a locally significant cult centre in the Alopeke deme, as she is known to have had, for example, at Erchia⁸⁸ and at Tricorythus.⁸⁹ What we do know is that the Alopekeans must have felt they had *some* kind of special relationship with Hera, and that this relationship had an impact on the language they spoke, furnishing us with an interesting example of an oath-related dialect feature associated very specifically not just with a single *polis*, but with a small subpart of one.

84 I leave out of account names which are derived, or compounded, from that of Heracles. I also omit the Herodorus of *IG* i³ 1018 (tentatively assigned by the inscription's first publisher, and by Byrne, to Rhamnus), since it is unsafe, especially in an inscription from the end of the sixth century, to draw any inference about a person's deme affiliation from the mere *absence* of a demotic.

85 Heracleitus, *IG* ii² 5582; Heroscamandrus, *IG* i³ 1512. The latter name reappears in the deme several generations later (*IG* ii² 5553 [tombstone, mid third century] and 1706.50 [thesmothete, 225/4]; doubtless grandfather and grandson), and never in any other. Interestingly, it also features in a pseudo-Platonic dialogue (*Theages* 129a–c) where Socrates tells how, warned by his divine sign, he nearly prevented one Timarchus from taking part in the murder of “Nicias son of Heroscamandrus”.

86 Herodorus of Diomeia (*IG* vii 315.1 and *SEG* xv 289.5); Herotheus of Otryne (*IG* ii² 7015). Sommerstein 2008b, 330 n.31 argues that there is no reason to reject the conventional location of Diomeia in the neighbourhood of the Cynosarges sanctuary and therefore also of Alopeke; Otryne was in the same tribe as Diomeia and probably located in the same area, since it is likely to have belonged to the city trittys (see Thompson 1969, 149; Schaps 1982). Both were very small demes, with only a single councillor each; if they were close to the large deme of Alopeke, they will probably have been very much under its influence. The fifth man is Herodotus of Aigilia (*IG* xii [6] 262, 329), a deme generally thought to lie on or near the south-west coast.

87 See Traill 1974, 22–3 and Table X.

88 See *SEG* xxi 541 I 6–11, II 32–9, III 38–41, IV 28–32.

89 R.B. Richardson 1895, 219 n.23.

13.2 How binding were informal oaths? The case of Aristophanes' *Clouds*⁹⁰

Informal oaths seem to have been a ubiquitous feature of everyday Greek conversation, and one might well suspect that familiarity had so devalued them that they were felt to have little or none of the binding force that formal oaths possessed (for which see ch. 11). In the present section this question will be examined with particular reference to comedy. Comedy accounts, as we have seen, for nearly half of all the informal oaths in our data, and in our best preserved comic author, Aristophanes, they are nearly twice as frequent (per thousand words) as in any author in any other genre. Characters in comedy, moreover, are particularly prone to lie, deceive, or twist language, which makes comedy an excellent test bed for hypotheses about the extent to which oaths, formal or otherwise, genuinely guarantee the truth of a statement or promise. We shall focus principally, but not exclusively, on Aristophanes' *Clouds*, because this is a play in which the existence and power of the gods, and the validity of oaths, are explicitly brought into question.

I shall begin by briefly summarizing the plot of *Clouds*.⁹¹ An elderly farmer (Strepsiades), who long ago foolishly married a woman of aristocratic birth used to a luxurious lifestyle, has been plunged heavily into debt by her and especially by their adolescent son (Pheidippides), a devotee of the very expensive pursuit of chariot-racing. He has the idea of sending his son to the Thinkhouse (*phrontistērion*) run by Socrates, so that he can be taught the skills of “unjust argument” which will enable him to help his father defeat the creditors when they go to court, but Pheidippides refuses to go.⁹² Strepsiades, though very doubtful (with good reason) of his own intellectual potential, then decides to go to the Thinkhouse himself. He meets Socrates and asks to be taken on as a pupil, offering to “swear by the gods” to pay any fee he is charged (245–6); which prompts

⁹⁰ This section is adapted from Sommerstein 2007.

⁹¹ That is, of *Clouds* as we have it. Two versions of the script were known in Hellenistic times; one was that which was produced, unsuccessfully, in 423 BC, the other – the one we possess – appears to have been partially revised with a view to being produced again (the incompleteness of the revision is shown by the survival of outdated topicalities and the absence of at least one choral song which would have made it impossible to stage the play without violating the rules of the comic competition). See Dover 1968, lxxx–xcviii; Sommerstein 1997 (with references to earlier studies); Casanova 2000.

⁹² Despite a threat by his father to expel him from the family home (121–3). The threat is backed by an informal oath (by Demeter), but Pheidippides ignores it and Strepsiades makes no attempt to implement it.

Socrates to explain that he and his disciples do not recognize the traditional gods – their gods are the Clouds, whom Socrates summons in a cletic prayer and who arrive to form the chorus of the play. After formally renouncing all worship of the traditional gods (423–6) Strepsiades enters the Thinkhouse, but proves far from an apt learner, and is on the point of being expelled with ignominy when the Clouds suggest that he might send his son to be taught in his place. Pheidippides this time allows himself to be persuaded into going to the school, is taught the new rhetoric and the new morality by the Unjust (or Worse) Argument in person, and emerges a “skilled sophist”, able to win any argument however hopeless. It is, however, Strepsiades himself who then puts his creditors to flight by a mixture of half-understood remnants of his Thinkhouse training, ridicule, and violence; in the course of this he repudiates a former sworn promise to repay a loan (1224–9) and blithely offers to deny on oath that he owes the creditor anything (1230–5). The Clouds, in Strepsiades’ absence, condemn his dishonesty (1303–20), and immediately afterwards he rushes out of his house complaining that his son has beaten him up. Pheidippides, making all too good use of his education, coolly sets out to prove that he had every right to attack his father, and reduces Strepsiades to silence and even acquiescence,⁹³ but he goes too far when he tries to appease his father by offering to beat up his mother as well. Strepsiades blames the Clouds for what Pheidippides has become, but they tell him it is his own fault for trying to evade his debts; he then takes revenge on Socrates by burning down the Thinkhouse, and the play ends with him chasing Socrates and his pupils away, crying “Chase them, hit them, pelt them ... remembering how they wronged the gods!” (1508–9).

It is, at first sight, a paradoxical feature of the play that though all three of the major characters reject belief in the traditional gods during at least part of the play – and one of them, Socrates, is an unbeliever from beginning to end – they all nevertheless go on swearing informal oaths by these gods. Does this, in fact, mean that informal oaths were mere casual emphasizees which could be disregarded with impunity? And are there any criteria by which we can determine the degree of sanctity and significance to be attached to such an oath? It is not, of course, very likely that we will find there was a hard-and-fast categorization of oaths into those that counted and those that didn’t; we will probably find ourselves dealing with a gradient, some informal oaths being more “casual”, some

⁹³ The acquiescence (1437–9) is dramatically weak and might well not have survived into the final script for the second performance, if there had ever been one; see Sommerstein 1982, 148 and 229.

more “serious”, with all gradations between, and several factors tending to move an utterance towards one end or the other of the scale.

In *Clouds* there are forty-seven oaths that we actually hear being uttered by characters in the action of the play; there are also three references to oaths said to have been given in the past (533, 1135, 1227)⁹⁴ and two offers to swear an oath in the future (244–5, 1232–5). Of the forty-seven oaths actually uttered, no less than forty-six are “informal”; the odd one out is the creditor’s vow to take legal proceedings against Strepsiades “or else may I not live” (1255). How can we attempt to determine the different degrees to which, if at all, these informal oaths were felt as solemn and binding?

We could, of course, look at the degree to which they actually influence the behaviour of those to whom they are addressed. This, however, will not get us very far. There are only two oaths in *Clouds* that clearly do (or rather did) influence the addressees’ behaviour, and we do not actually hear either of them being uttered. One is the so-called oath (perhaps, in any case, best regarded as only a metaphorical one) by which the Athenian audience are said to have bound themselves when they gave a good reception to Aristophanes’ first play (528–33); as the following words *nun oun* “now therefore . . .” indicate, the claim being made is that it is because of this “oath” that Aristophanes has chosen to write another play with an intellectual theme. The other is the oath, already mentioned, which Strepsiades gave when asking for his loan. Since the creditor, pressing for payment, reminds Strepsiades about this oath, he had evidently taken it seriously at the time, and we can reasonably assume that if Strepsiades had not sworn to pay, the loan would not have been made. But we are given no indication of how he expressed the oath. It may have been informal – if, for example, he was asked whether he would repay the loan and replied νῆ τοὺς θεοὺς ἔγωγε “yes, by the gods, I will”, or the like; but it may also, for all we know, have been expressed formally (e.g. ὀμνῶμι τοὺς θεοὺς ἀποδώσειν ἃ δανείζομαι “I swear by the gods that I will repay what I am borrowing”). We therefore have no opportunity, in *Clouds* at least, to judge informal oaths by their consequences; we can only judge them by their expression and context.

I consider below seven hypotheses about how the expression or context of an oath might influence its perceived solemnity and binding force.

⁹⁴ On two further occasions (825, 1240–1), a character makes a comment on an oath uttered a short time previously by another character.

(a) Is the oath by Zeus, or by another god or gods?

In all kinds of texts where informal oaths are common, as we saw earlier in this chapter, more of them are taken in the name of Zeus than in that of any other divinity. Of the 46 informal oaths in *Clouds*, more than half (26) are by Zeus. It is *prima facie* plausible that this familiarity might breed contempt – that even though Zeus was the most powerful god, an oath by him might not be the most powerful oath, particularly since it was phonetically shorter and weaker than almost any other.

In *Clouds*, however, the invocation of gods other than Zeus has no particular association with key moments in the play, or with the other criteria discussed below. There is only one clear correlation detectable in *Clouds* between this phenomenon and *anything* else, and it is this.

Of the 46 informal oaths in *Clouds*, 25 are uttered by Strepsiades. Eleven of these precede, and fourteen follow, the moment at which he repudiates traditional religion. Of the latter, two (at 665 and 814) are by “new” gods (Air and Mist) and can be excluded from consideration. Of the eleven oaths he utters while still presumably believing in Zeus and the other traditional gods, eight⁹⁵ are in the name of Zeus and three⁹⁶ of other gods; of the twelve he subsequently swears in the name of gods he has repudiated, seven⁹⁷ invoke Zeus and five⁹⁸ invoke other powers. The *extent* of the difference may not be of much significance, but its *direction* is striking: Strepsiades after his irreligious conversion swears, on average, “heavier”, more noticeable oaths than he did before! Of course, the very fact that he swears by the traditional gods at all is a notable incongruity, and it contrasts, though not in a completely black-and-white way, with the behaviour of the permanent inmates of the Thinkhouse: Socrates, his students, and the Worse Argument between them utter only six oaths by traditional deities, and only two of them (773, 1000) are by deities other than Zeus. Strepsiades’ poor understanding of the new concepts and theories to which he is introduced is much commented on by Socrates and by modern scholars alike,⁹⁹ and the increased “visibility” of his invocations of traditional gods, at a time when he logically should not have been invoking them at all, may be one of the dramatist’s methods of drawing attention to this. Visibility, however, is one thing; binding force is another, and

⁹⁵ 217, 250–1, 261, 327–8, 329–30, 343–4, 346–7, 408–11.

⁹⁶ 121, 372, 386–8.

⁹⁷ 483, 652, 733, 1234–5, 1238–9, 1338–9, 1406–7.

⁹⁸ 454–6, 664–5, 723–4, 732, 781.

⁹⁹ See especially Green 1979 and Woodbury 1980.

there is no evidence in *Clouds* that an oath by Zeus, simply because it was an oath by Zeus, was perceived as less binding than any other.

However, two passages in other Aristophanic plays may be significant. Near the beginning of the confrontation between Paphlagon and the Sausage-seller in *Knights*, when the latter has just started to make a speech, Paphlagon twice tries to interrupt, saying “will you still not give way to me?” (336, 338). Each time the Sausage-seller replies *μὰ Δία* “no, by Zeus”; on the second occasion, however, Paphlagon ripostes *ναὶ μὰ Δία* “yes, by Zeus”, and this time the Sausage-seller delivers a counter-riposte:

μὰ τὸν Ποσειδῶ,
ἀλλ’ αὐτὸ περὶ τοῦ πρότερος εἰπεῖν πρῶτα διαμαχοῦμαι.

No, by Poseidon; I'll fight it out first for the right to speak before you (338–9).

This response apparently wins that particular tussle, since Paphlagon can only cry in frustrated fury “ah me, I'm going to burst!” (340) – which at least suggests that the Sausage-seller's substitution of “by Poseidon” for “by Zeus” had made it clearer than before that he was determined not to yield. A passage in *Frogs*, contrariwise, may indicate the significance of a *refusal* to make such a substitution. Dionysus, in the underworld, has been terrified out of his wits by an apparition, or supposed apparition,¹⁰⁰ of the shape-changing demon Empusa (*Frogs* 285–301). Eventually the demon goes away, as the slave Xanthias assures his badly shaken master (301–5); but Dionysus is not satisfied with Xanthias' bare word, and demands that he confirm it by an oath. Xanthias replies *νὴ τὸν Δία* “yes, by Zeus, (she's gone)”, but Dionysus asks him to swear a second and then a third time – and each time he repeats *νὴ Δία* “yes, by Zeus”. If he had substituted the name of Poseidon or Apollo at the second request, would Dionysus have felt it necessary to make a third?

(b) If the oath is by Zeus, does it name him with the definite article?

In almost all informal oaths, as already noted, the name of the god invoked is preceded by the definite article: one says *μὰ τὸν Ποσειδῶ*, not **μὰ Ποσειδῶ*. The only

100 The audience can never be quite certain whether Xanthias is actually seeing Empusa or only pretending to do so (Dionysus himself never sees her, doubtless being too frightened ever to look).

significant exception is where the god is Zeus; in his case the article is optional and, in Aristophanes at least, is usually omitted¹⁰¹.

To some extent the choice of including or omitting the article is doubtless driven by metrical considerations; but this is certainly not the whole story. The pattern that we saw under (a), in fact, appears again, *mutatis mutandis*. The early Strepsiades (up to line 411) swears eight times by Zeus, and seven of these are in the short form (without the article)¹⁰²; the later Strepsiades swears seven times by Zeus, and only four of these¹⁰³ are in the short form. Once again Strepsiades' usage changes in the direction of oaths of greater bulk, and once again it changes *away* from the pattern favoured by the permanent inmates of the school, *all* of whose four oaths by Zeus are in the short form. The explanation for this is doubtless the same as before.

However, while there is nothing in *Clouds*, or in Aristophanes generally, that clearly indicates that an oath by Zeus with the definite article is more solemn than one without, we cannot yet rule out completely the existence of such a differential. It is striking, in particular, that in the argumentative idiom whereby a political or forensic speaker introduces an actual or imaginary objection in order to rebut it (see ch. 9), if the objection is reinforced by an informal oath it is always νῆ Δία, not νῆ τὸν Δία or anything heavier.¹⁰⁴ Since the speaker is aiming to destroy the credibility of the objection, it would not be surprising, to say the least, if, among the various oath-formulae that an objector might have used to bolster its credibility, it was the practice, when using this technique, to put into his mouth the weakest possible.

(c) Is the name of the god invoked accompanied by an epithet?

A prayer, it was thought, was more likely to be effective if the god was addressed by a title that was particularly pleasing to him/her or particularly appropriate to the occasion.¹⁰⁵ An oath is a special kind of prayer, conditionally requesting harm rather than good for oneself, and by parity of reasoning it too should be

¹⁰¹ The ratio in *Clouds* (seven informal Zeus-oaths with the article, out of a total of twenty-six) is fairly typical. Across the eleven extant plays, just under a quarter of all informal Zeus-oaths (90 out of 362) have the article; the highest proportion (in *Acharnians*) is 37.5%, the lowest (in *Knights*) 12.5%.

¹⁰² All except the first of them, at 217.

¹⁰³ 733, 1234–5, 1338–9, 1406–7.

¹⁰⁴ Typical examples are Isaeus 3.73, 4.20; Dem. 6.13, 6.14, 19.158, 19.272, 21.160, 21.222; Hyp. Eux. 14; Dein. 2.8. The idiom is also used by Xenophon (*Mem.* 1.2.9, *Hell.* 7.3.10).

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Pl. *Crat.* 400e, *Phil.* 12c; see Fraenkel 1950, 99–100, on Aesch. *Ag.* 160–1.

more effective if the god was invoked under a suitable epithet. And in *Clouds* this expectation seems to be borne out. There are three occasions when a god named in an oath is given an epithet: all of them are of considerable dramatic importance, in all three cases the wording of the oath attracts comment from another character, and in two of the three passages we shall find other markers showing that the oath is of special significance.

We begin with the first oath-utterance in the play (83), at the beginning of the first real dialogue between Strepsiades and his son. Pheidippides, asked if he loves his father, replies "Yes, by Poseidon Hippios here". Strepsiades begs him not to swear by Poseidon *Hippios* – the god of horses – because "that god is the author of my troubles". It is even possible that this oath can be said to influence Strepsiades' behaviour; presumably he asks Pheidippides the question because he is apprehensive how Pheidippides will receive the proposal that he should go to Socrates' school, and we might wonder whether Strepsiades would have dared to make the proposal if Pheidippides had not confirmed his affirmative answer by so emphatic an oath.

It is perhaps significant that the next passage to be considered (817) comes at the beginning of the *second* dialogue between Strepsiades and his son. Strepsiades is trying to expel Pheidippides from his home; Pheidippides, baffled by his father's behaviour, says to him "You're not in your right mind, by Zeus Olympios." Strepsiades is amused, and professes to be appalled, that a grown man should still believe in Zeus; and the existence of Zeus, and the absurdity of swearing by him, are the subject of the next fourteen lines, culminating in the well-known reference to "Socrates the Melian", i.e. the atheist¹⁰⁶ (830).

As that oath was linked to the earlier one by its position in a father-son dialogue, so it is linked to a later one (1239–40) by Strepsiades' laughter. Strepsiades' first creditor, already denied his money with perjury and insults, says furiously "By Zeus the great, and by the gods, you shan't get away with treating me like this!" Strepsiades laughs uproariously, saying that swearing by Zeus and the gods is risible "to those in the know". Strepsiades' treatment of this creditor is his first and decisive overt act of immorality in the course of the play.

In *Clouds*, therefore, it does appear that the presence of an epithet gives special prominence and significance to an oath. How typical is this of the Aristophanic corpus? The pattern turns out to be patchy. In Aristophanes' other five earlier plays (down to and including *Birds*) there are only two informal oaths in which the god is given an epithet, and in both cases, it seems, the device is again

¹⁰⁶ As if confusing him with the notorious (and later outlawed) scoffer at religion, Diagoras of Melos.

being used to highlight these utterances – this time for the paradoxical reason that their utterers are rogues and the value of their oaths highly questionable. In *Acharnians* (730) a Megarian, renewing acquaintance after a long interval with the Athenian Agora, swears by Zeus Philios that he has yearned for it “as for a mother”; but the intensity of that love is put in some doubt, to say the least, when later, having sold his two daughters for a little garlic and salt,¹⁰⁷ he prays to Hermes to be able to sell his wife *and mother* for as good a price (817). And in *Knights* (297–8) the Sausage-seller, anxious to prove that he is a greater villain than Paphlagon-Cleon, swears by Hermes Agoraios that he ... commits bare-faced perjury! In *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae* there are considerably more epithetted informal oaths; the majority are uttered by women,¹⁰⁸ and neither they nor the only one uttered by a male¹⁰⁹ seem to have any special significance. In Aristophanes’ last three extant plays (*Frogs*, *Ecclesiazusae*, *Wealth*) only one kind of epithetted informal oath is found – that by Zeus Soter, which occurs seven times.¹¹⁰ Sometimes, but not always, it is used at a moment when the speaker feels he really has been blessedly saved from evil¹¹¹ in *Frogs* the two moments when it is used are moments when the theme of saving Athens in its time of peril is particularly strong.¹¹² It would appear, therefore, that epithets *can* be used, in a particular passage or play, to confer special significance on an informal oath, but that they do not always *actually* do so.

(d) Is the oath-formula a conjunction of two or more invocations?

Such a conjunction creates what one might call a “belt-and-braces” oath: if by any chance one of the powers invoked fails to enforce the oath, the swearer

¹⁰⁷ He is starving, which is why he is willing to give so much for so little.

¹⁰⁸ *Lys.* 443–4, 447–8, 554, 738–9; *Thesm.* 858.

¹⁰⁹ *Lys.* 403, where the Proboulos, swearing by Poseidon Halykos (“the Briny”), says that men, because of their laxness in controlling their wives, have only themselves to blame for the women’s current hybriatic behaviour.

¹¹⁰ *Frogs* 738–9, 1433; *Eccl.* 79–81, 760–1, 1045–6, 1102–4; *Wealth* 877–9.

¹¹¹ At *Eccl.* 1045–6 the young man thinks that his girlfriend has rescued him from the clutches of a hideous old woman by putting her to flight (alas, she in turn will be put to flight a moment later by an even more hideous old woman); at *Wealth* 877–9 an honest man rejoices in Wealth’s discomfiture of a sykophant and, he hopes, of all his kind.

¹¹² *Frogs* 738 directly follows the parabasis, whose main subject has been how best to secure the survival of Athens; in 1433–4 Dionysus, who has just said (1418–19) that he has come to Hades to find a poet ‘so that the City may survive’, expresses for the last time his inability to choose between Aeschylus and Euripides, prior to subjecting the pair to a final test by asking them for ‘one more suggestion each about a way ... for the City to secure her survival’ (1435–6).

has ensured that another will be available to do so. Hence in taking a formal oath, several deities are often specified as “witnesses” or “oath-gods”: in 1234 Strepsiades’ creditor specifies three, and the Athenian “ephebic oath”, as taken at Acharnae (RO 88), named seventeen (see S&B 16–21). As noted earlier in this chapter (p. 320), informal oaths by multiple gods are particularly frequent in the orators.

Such conjunctions occur twice in *Clouds*. One is the creditor’s oath at 1239–40, already discussed. The other occurs at 627–9. This is a significant moment in the play: it directly follows the end of the *parabasis* and thus marks the beginning of a new phase in the action, it is the first we have heard of Strepsiades since he entered Socrates’ school, and it is the first occasion in the play on which anyone swears by one of the “new” gods whom Socrates and his followers worship. Socrates comes out of the school and swears “by Respiration, by Chaos, by Air” that he has never met such a hopeless and forgetful pupil. This utterance is not addressed to anyone in particular, but it is clearly being given the utmost emphasis.

There are only three informal oaths in the rest of the Aristophanic corpus that are reinforced in this way, and all have other unusual features. In two of them the oath-formulae are comic. The Sausage-seller swears “by the fists whose blows I’ve borne ... many a time ... and by the slashes of butchers’ knives” that he believes he will surpass Paphlagon in shamelessness (*Knights* 411–13) – responding to, and evidently (as he always does) outdoing, Paphlagon’s oath “by Poseidon” that he will not do so; and the Hoopoe (formerly Tereus) swears “by earth, by snares, by gins, by nets” (*Birds* 194) – probably parodying a tragic or satyric line (*trag. adesp.* 123a) – that Peisetaerus’ scheme for a bird city is the cleverest thing he has ever heard. Likewise expressing enthusiastic approval and admiration are the chorus of *Knights* when they praise the Sausage-seller for an exuberant curse on Paphlagon (*Knights* 941–2); their oath is in the name of a quite conventional triad, Zeus, Apollo and Demeter¹¹³ – but, most abnormally, it is uttered *in prose*.

(e) Is attention drawn to features of sanctity in the environment?

As discussed in ch. 6 above, it was common, when prescribing the terms for a formal oath, to specify that it be taken in a sacred place and/or in contact with sacred objects. Accordingly, when Strepsiades’ creditor challenges him to swear to his denial of indebtedness, he asks that the oath be taken “in whatever place

¹¹³ These three were the ‘Oath-Gods’ (*horkioi theoi*) by whom were sworn oaths of particular solemnity (Deinarchus fr. 29 Conomis) including that of the Athenian jurors (Pollux 8.122); see Fisher 2001, 254–5, and S&B 43, 72, 79, 154, 164, 166, 208–9.

I may require" (1233); and when Lysistrata's comrades take their oath of sexual abstinence (*Lys.* 181–239), they do so with their hands on what, in comedy, is the most sacred object known to a woman – a cup of wine.¹¹⁴ In *Clouds* there seem to be a number of representations (some probably fully iconic, others not) of various divinities visible in the acting area. When Pheidippides swears by Poseidon at 83, a passage we have already examined, he speaks of "this Poseidon here" and must evidently be pointing to an image¹¹⁵ and Strepsiades' choice of Hermes as the god to pray to at 1478 is best explained if there is a pillar-image of Hermes in front of his door as there was in front of so many real doors in Athens.¹¹⁶ Since, further, the whole performance¹¹⁷ was taking place in the Theatre of Dionysus during the City Dionysia, we know that an image of Dionysus was present too.

Any or all of the informal oaths in *Clouds* that invoke Poseidon, Hermes or Dionysus may have been accompanied by a gesture towards the god's visible representation, and one of them, Pheidippides' oath at 83, certainly was; we have seen too that this is not the only indication of special sanctity attached to this oath – and we will be coming back to it yet again. Several other oaths taken in the name of these deities can also be shown to be of special significance in the play. I omit the oath by Dionysus uttered at the beginning of the *parabasis* (518–24) by the chorus-leader in the name of the poet; this is certainly a very impressive oath, prominently placed (and it has an interesting parallel, on the same topic, in *Wasps* 1046–7, also from a *parabasis*), but it is not strictly speaking "informal", since the speaker goes on to specify blessings to befall him if his assertions are true ("may I be victorious and be thought a true artist", 520) and, by implication, evils to befall him if they are not; I omit also the oaths by Poseidon at 665 and 724, which are uttered at the Thinkhouse, not at Strepsiades' home, and would certainly not be accompanied by any gesture towards that Poseidon Hippios whom the speaker, Strepsiades, so much abhors.

At 90–91 Pheidippides swears by Dionysus to obey his father's instruction to "go and learn what I'm going to ask you to" (89); he has asked to know what it is that he is to go and learn, but his father has insisted on an explicit promise to obey before revealing this. Since Strepsiades had objected vehemently to his

114 In an explicitly signalled parody (cf. *Lys.* 188–9) of the conquer-or-die oath taken by the Seven against Thebes (Aesch. *Seven* 42–8) with their hands touching the blood of a sacrificed bull collected in the hollow of a shield.

115 Russo 1962, 172 (1994, 110) argues that the image need not necessarily be visible to the audience; but see Dover 1968, 104–5.

116 So e.g. Dover 1968, lxxvi, 265; Sommerstein 1982, 231; Russo 1994, 110.

117 Both the actual performance of the original version of *Clouds*, and the performance for which the revised play was being prepared.

son's previous choice of Poseidon Hippios as a god to swear by, we are probably meant to notice that Pheidippides now chooses a different god, particularly since $\nu\eta\ \tau\acute{o}\nu\ \Delta\iota\acute{o}\nu\upsilon\sigma\sigma\omicron\nu$ has the same metrical value as $\nu\eta\ \tau\acute{o}\nu\ \Pi\omicron\sigma\sigma\epsilon\iota\delta\acute{\omega}$. Perhaps he may even begin to raise an arm in the direction of the image of Poseidon before thinking better of it and diverting his gesture towards the image of Dionysus.

Having heard where and with whom he is being asked to study, Pheidippides swears, again by Dionysus, that he will not do so under any circumstances, "not if you gave me the pheasants that Leogoras rears" (109). What is significant about this oath is, of course, that it directly contradicts and falsifies an oath taken by the same god only eighteen lines previously – a fact which could of course be emphasized by a repetition of any gesture accompanying the earlier oath. To such flagrantly contradictory swearing, at so short an interval, we know of no parallel in any Greek text from the period covered by the project database¹¹⁸ it can reasonably be said to indicate that Pheidippides, long before he enters the Thinkhouse, is at heart almost as contemptuous of the gods as Socrates himself.

The oath by Dionysus at 1000–1 is a surprising candidate for special solemnity, since the speaker is the Worse Argument, whom one would have expected not to believe in Dionysus' existence or power. It is addressed to Pheidippides, and assures him that if he follows the path of traditional virtue as recommended by the Better Argument, "you'll become like the [imbecile] sons of Hippocrates, and they'll call you a pap-sucker [= milksop]". This is the most noticeable oath by a traditional god ever uttered in the play by a permanent inmate of the school; and there is a good chance that we are meant to reflect on it, and to reflect that it is false. The Better Argument, after all, has himself pointed out (985–6) that the kind of education and upbringing that he favours "bred the men who fought at Marathon", and nobody would think of *them* as imbeciles or milksops. The statement made here by the Worse Argument is the first substantive assertion he

118 There are, however, other passages in comedy in which oath-expressions are used to draw attention to inconsistency or vacillation that does not amount to blatant self-contradiction. In *Frogs* 1119–76, Euripides analyses the first few lines of Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, showing (he claims) that Aeschylus repeatedly "says the same thing twice". When he finds such a repetition in line 3 ("I have come and returned to this land") Dionysus, once he understands the point being made, responds "Yes, by Zeus" (1158). Aeschylus then argues that "come" (*hēkō*) and "return" (*katerkhomai*) are not in fact synonymous, since the latter could only be said by an exile like Orestes; Dionysus responds "Very good, by Apollo!" (1166). Euripides rejoins that *katerkhomai* is anyway not appropriate to Orestes because he was not recalled from exile but came home secretly; Dionysus responds "Very good, by Hermes!" (1169). It is thus made very evident how limited Dionysus' critical faculties are, even before he goes on to add that he does not know what Euripides means!

has made during his debate (*agōn*) with the Better Argument; it is backed by a powerful oath; and it is probably to be taken as untrue. But then this is the character who will presently say (1081) that Zeus is, literally, “weaker than ... women” (ἥττων ... γυναικῶν)¹¹⁹.

At 1277 the second creditor swears by Hermes that he will summon Strepsiadēs to court if he is not paid his money. This is the strongest of three oaths that he utters, and, reinforcing a threat as it does, it mirrors two powerful oaths by the first creditor (1239, 1255; discussed above) and should probably be regarded as equalling them in force. The speaker certainly hopes, and probably expects, that it will have an influence on Strepsiadēs – though it does not.

To extend this inquiry to the whole Aristophanic corpus would require us to determine for each play which divine images, if any, were part of the stage setting, and that would take us too far from our subject; I will therefore, as regards the other comedies, concentrate on the one divinity whose image we know to have been always present, namely Dionysus. A review of the nine informal oaths by Dionysus found in the ten surviving comedies other than *Clouds*¹²⁰ does not on the whole suggest that invocation of Dionysus (rather than, say, Zeus or Poseidon) in itself confers any particular extra significance either on the utterance it accompanies or on the structural position occupied by the passage in the play.¹²¹ It seems likely, therefore, that the Dionysus oaths of *Clouds* 91 and 109 owe their prominence more to their context (including their proximity to each other) than to anything else.

(f) Has the oath been solicited by another person?

The great majority of informal oaths, in *Clouds* and elsewhere, arise simply from the speaker’s desire to add impressiveness and credibility to what (s)he is saying. But a small number are uttered because someone else has requested them. To solicit an oath (or even a solemn promise) signals that one is particularly anxious to secure a guarantee of reliability for what one is about to be told; to give a solicited oath is to give that guarantee, and to break it is to break faith with the other

¹¹⁹ He means that Zeus is regularly vanquished by *desire* for mortal females; but that is not what he says.

¹²⁰ *Wasps* 1474; *Peace* 109, 1277; *Birds* 171, 501, 1370; *Eccl.* 344, 357, 422.

¹²¹ However, the three oaths of this type in *Ecclesiastusae* – the only ones to be found in Aristophanes’ last five plays – are of interest for a different reason: they all occur in the same scene, and all in the mouth of the same character, Blepýrus, who in this scene, and in this scene alone, is wearing his wife’s clothes (she having “borrowed” his). May this be related to Dionysus’ well-known tendency to wear women’s garments (as he does in *Frogs*)?

party in a matter known to be of considerable concern to them. Hence an oath can be expected to have greater solemnity if it has been solicited.

Strictly speaking, there are no solicited oaths in *Clouds*. The first creditor does challenge Strepsiades to deny on oath that he owes him money (1232–4), but he abandons the challenge when it becomes evident that Strepsiades regards the oath as a meaningless form of words. There are, however, two oaths which can be viewed in a broader sense as having been solicited. Both of them have already been shown above to be marked in other ways as being of special seriousness: Pheidippides' oaths by Poseidon and Dionysus at 83 and 91 respectively.

The question "Do you love me?" (82) is a fraught one at any time, particularly when it is asked, as in this case, by one person of another who has a *duty* to love him/her. Immediately before asking this question, Strepsiades has asked Pheidippides to kiss him and give him his right hand; this would normally constitute a binding pledge of affection and loyalty (cf. *Frogs* 754, 788–9), though it was not quite as strong as an oath (cf. *Soph. Phil.* 810–13).¹²² The fact that *after* receiving such a pledge Strepsiades is still sufficiently uncertain to put the question indicates that he wants some stronger assurance, and it can be argued that it virtually compels Pheidippides to put his answer in the form of an oath. Heracles in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (1174–90; see §5.2) makes things more explicit. He first tells his son Hyllus that it is his duty to obey his father; Hyllus promises to do so. He then demands that Hyllus give him the pledge of a handclasp (refusing to tell him why); Hyllus does so. He next orders Hyllus to swear by Zeus to fulfil what his father will command him, explicitly wishing suffering on himself if he breaks his oath; Hyllus duly swears (formally, as is usual in tragedy), and is then told what the command is: to place his father alive on a pyre and set light to it.

That passage, of course, illustrates not only the relationship between the handclasp and the oath but also the ploy of demanding that a person swear to do X before being told what X is (see e.g. pp. 174, 273–6). Something like this sequence, though not quite the same thing, occurs in *Clouds* 88–91, where Strepsiades, before telling his son what he wants him to study and where, asks for a promise that he will obey the request when made, and is answered in the affirmative with an oath by Dionysus. Strepsiades has again not exactly solicited an oath, but he has shown that he is anxious about the matter and needs a strong assurance – even after Pheidippides' other oath, six lines earlier – so it is not surprising that Pheidippides swears again. The oath, as we have seen, is broken within three minutes.

122 Cf. A. Allan 2007, 114–15.

(g) Has the oath been preceded by explicit discussion of swearing?

What makes an oath informal is that it has no explicit reference to swearing or to conditional self-cursing. If, however, such reference forms part of the *context* in which an informal oath is uttered, that immediately tends to make it less informal. The actual soliciting of an oath is one way, but by no means the only way, in which this can happen. Another is illustrated by the last example we shall discuss, the paradoxical passage (1228–9) in which Strepsiades in effect swears that a previous sworn promise was false. He has just (though not in so many words) denied ever having borrowed money from the “first creditor”,¹²³ and is reminded that he had sworn by the gods to pay it (1227) – in effect putting him on notice that to deny the debt exists, or to refuse payment, will be an act of perjury. He replies:

Well, *by Zeus*, at that time my Pheidippides didn't yet know the invincible Argument (1228–9).

Normally we would not attach much importance to an oath-formula of this kind; but it is different when we, and Strepsiades, have just been reminded of a previous oath which he is at risk of breaking. Not that the oath he is actually giving at this moment is untruthful: it is perfectly true that Pheidippides had not yet learned “unjust argument” at the time when the money was borrowed. It is, nevertheless, flagrantly shameless for him to use an oath to reinforce his statement when his behaviour shows he regards oaths as worthless.¹²⁴

It will have been observed that we have kept coming back to just two sections of the play where oaths are at the centre of our attention: the first dialogue between Strepsiades and Pheidippides (where Pheidippides' basically amoral and impious character is established), and the scenes between Strepsiades and the creditors (where Strepsiades in his turn gives a display of gross impiety and amorality, which dramatically speaking justifies his subsequent fate). To these we may add two other passages in which oaths are the subject of explicit discussion: the second dialogue between father and son (816–31), where Pheidippides is criticized for swearing by Zeus, and, much earlier, Socrates' first statement, in

123 When the creditor summons Strepsiades to appear before a magistrate (the first stage in bringing a lawsuit), Strepsiades asks what it is about, and the creditor replies “The twelve minas that you borrowed when you bought the dark-grey horse” (1224–5); to which Strepsiades retorts “‘Horse!’ Hark at him! Me, who you all know loathes everything to do with horses!” (1225–6). (He was, of course, buying the horse, doubtless unwillingly, for his son, not for himself.)

124 A further dose of shamelessness is added by the contradiction between Strepsiades' implicit denial, a moment before, that he borrowed the money, and his admission now that he swore to repay it!

the context of an offer by Strepsiades to swear to pay his fee, that “we don’t credit gods here” (247–8). The key oaths in these passages very definitely *are* oaths, and the discrediting of their validity is one crucial aspect of the sophistic subversion of ethical values as presented in this play.

So *are* there circumstances in which informal oaths do lack all binding force? So far as *Clouds* is concerned the answer might seem to be “no”. Even though oaths may often seem to be little more than conversational counters, people still do not, in general, swear to statements that they do not believe to be true (if relating to the present or the past) or do not intend to be true (if relating to their own future actions). Or if they do, they show themselves to be contemptors of the divine. Pheidippides and the Worse Argument do so in this play, and so, for a time, until he sees the light, does Strepsiades.

But if we look beyond *Clouds*, things become a little more complicated. We cannot here examine all the sworn statements in Aristophanes that are not straightforwardly and self-evidently true; let us concentrate on the smaller category defined above – assertory oaths which the speaker does not believe to be true, and promissory oaths which (s)he has no intention of keeping or which (s)he subsequently breaks in a manner showing bad faith. In Aristophanes’ surviving plays other than *Clouds*, there are about twenty-two of these.¹²⁵ They can be grouped into four classes.

- (a) *Oaths uttered by villains* – or rather by one villain, the Sausage-seller in *Knights*, who claims to outdo Paphlagon-Cleon in wickedness because he is not only a thief but a bare-faced perjurer too (297–8, 418–24, 1239). There is no clear instance of his actually committing perjury during the play itself; his sworn promise (“by Demeter”) to prove that Paphlagon had taken a large bribe from Mytilene (832–5) may well seem extremely far-fetched (given that Cleon had argued strenuously for the extermination of Mytilene’s male population), but it is not entirely clear that we are meant to take it as self-evidently false (rather than e.g. as an accusation that Cleon had taken money from the Mytileneans by promising to argue that they should be spared, and had then double-crossed them).
- (b) *Oaths in matters of love* – which were often alleged not to count as oaths at all. In §11.2 above it was shown that *formal* oaths were in practice treated as binding even in these circumstances, but with informal oaths it is sometimes otherwise. In *Lysistrata* such oaths are sworn by the Third Woman (752), who

¹²⁵ Excluding two which refer to events in the world outside the comic fiction: the alleged Spartan breach of the Peace of Nicias (cf. *Lys.* 513–14) and the boys who are persuaded by lovers’ gifts to break oaths of chastity (*Birds* 705–7).

wants to get out of the Acropolis and back to her husband; by Lysistrata (855–88), who wants to stir up Cinesias' sexual tension and frustration to the highest possible pitch; and by Myrrhine (949), who wants to lull him into believing that she is about to satisfy his desires. The deities invoked are Zeus, Aphrodite and Artemis.

- (c) *Ironical or exaggerated statements not intended to deceive.* Apart from a single example in *Birds* (1358), these appear only in the three latest plays, *Frogs* (285), *Ecclesiazusae* (377, 390–1), and *Wealth* (380–1, 657–8, 987). Typical are the ironic statement that *Wealth* must have been “happy” to be bathed in cold sea water (*Wealth* 657–8) and the exaggerated statement that the assembly meeting attended by Chremes had ended before sunrise and before the second cock-crow (*Eccl.* 377, 390–1) – when in fact it had not then even begun;¹²⁶ Chremes only means that it ended very early, before many male citizens had arrived. The god invoked is usually Zeus, but once it is Apollo (*Wealth* 987) and once “the gods” (*Wealth* 380).
- (d) *None of the above.* False oaths for which none of the above explanations is available occur in these ten plays as follows; unless otherwise stated, the oath is “by Zeus”.
1. *Wasps* 184 (Philocleon: “my name is Nobody”).
 2. *Birds* 1680 (Poseidon: “the Triballian god is not saying that Basileia ought to be handed over to the birds”).
 3. *Lysistrata* 990 (Spartan herald: “I have not got an erection”).
 4. *Lysistrata* 1236–8 (Athenian diners, offstage: “the Spartans did not choose the wrong song to sing”; it is not stated which god was invoked).
 5. *Thesmophoriazusae* 623–4 (Euripides' in-law, disguised as a woman: “I come to the Thesmophoria every year”).
 6. *Frogs* 49–51 (Dionysus: “Cleisthenes and I sank twelve or thirteen enemy ships ... by Apollo”).
 7. *Frogs* 650 (Xanthias: “I didn't feel any pain”).
 8. *Frogs* 1471 (Dionysus repudiates a previous oath, sworn in the name of at least two gods, to take Euripides home¹²⁷).
 9. *Ecclesiazusae* 553 (Praxagora: “I don't know what the Assembly decided”).

¹²⁶ Assembly meetings regularly began at sunrise (cf. *Ach.* 19–20); the second cock-crow is mentioned in *Eccl.* 30–31 as having already been heard, and yet the women, who are anxious to reach the Pnyx early, do not depart thither until 285.

¹²⁷ He has not in fact sworn any such oath during the play, but no spectator will think of that while watching this scene.

Three features of this list may be noted. Firstly, such acts of clear perjury, by characters not apparently meant to be seen as villains, are heavily concentrated in the later plays – only one of them appears in a play produced before 414 BC. Secondly, with one exception, all the oaths are assertory, not promissory. Thirdly, with one exception (the same one), either the false statement is one that can do no harm (4, 9)¹²⁸ or else the deception quickly fails because it is not believed (1, 2, 3, 6) or is detected (5, 7).¹²⁹ And the exception itself, *Frogs* 1471, is easily explained: Euripides, of all people, could not complain of being deceived by a false oath, because it was he who had made available, in a notorious line of *Hippolytus* (612; see §11.3), an argument that was capable of nullifying any oath whatsoever – and Dionysus here quotes half of this line back at him.

This evidence suggests that even in the case of informal oaths uttered by characters in comedy, there remained, in the late fifth and early fourth centuries, a significant degree of reluctance to attach an oath-formula to a false or insincere statement, and an even stronger degree of reluctance to show such an action as being successful to the detriment of others; the one exception really proves the rule, as it shows the author of what was alleged to be a perjurer's charter being hoist with his own petard. The informal, conversational oath may no longer have been envisaged as automatically calling down divine wrath on the swearer if it was attached, under any circumstances, to an untrue statement; and there is some evidence that attitudes in this respect became somewhat laxer during the course of Aristophanes' lifetime. But an oath, even a seemingly casual one, still counted for something – and all the more so when, as in *Clouds*, the existence and power of the gods was at issue.

128 In *Lys.* 1236–8, the Athenians' objective is simply to spare the Spartans embarrassment; their falsehood cannot do the Spartans any harm and may indeed benefit them (e.g. by helping them win a symposiac game). In *Eccl.* 553, if Praxagora tells the truth, she risks losing the opportunity to implement a social revolution which she believes will be greatly to the benefit of men and women alike – including Blepyrus, to whom she is speaking.

129 Xanthias' deception (he is claiming to be the god Heracles, whose costume he was wearing when arrested) is unmasked when he and Dionysus are taken before Pluto and Persephone (*Frogs* 669–71, 741–2).