

Introduction

This book seeks to open up a fresh perspective on Aristophanic comedy and its relationship to Greek religion. My focus is on *Wealth*, staged in 388 BC, which presents a miraculous and fantastical solution to the age-old problem of economic inequality: The god Wealth, blinded by a misanthropic Zeus to keep him away from his poor but righteous worshippers, is healed and redistributes his benefits to all people.¹ I propose that this comedy is structured upon a rich and largely unexplored religious framework, based on traditional narratives of religious experiences that permeate the plot and underlie its comic fantasy. Attention to this framework, I believe, yields a more holistic reading of the play, clarifying aspects that have puzzled interpreters, such as the unusual hands-on participation of gods in the dramatic action, as well as certain episodes that are often passed over in interpretations of the comedy, in particular its main messenger speech, which reports the crucial moment when Wealth is cured by the healer god Asclepius. In order to understand this framework, I shall examine in detail the form and function of the traditional narratives out of which it is made, showing how Aristophanes incorporates religious elements into his drama in ways that have not previously been taken into account. My analysis has also led me beyond these narratives and the play itself to a larger question: How did Aristophanes' comedies take part in the various discourses on religion that existed in his time? Could his humorous dramatization of these narratives, which at times is quite provocative and even subversive, have a role in religious discourse, in transmitting and even transforming belief? The play *Wealth* offers an excellent opportunity not only to explore these questions but also, and more significantly, to examine the bond between humor and religion in general.

¹ Aristophanes staged an earlier comedy with the same title in 408 BC. For the relationship of this play to the *Wealth* of 388 BC, see Sommerstein 2001: 28–33. I agree with his view that the second *Wealth* is a new creation, and not a revised version of the earlier play as other scholars have argued.

The past decades have seen a remarkable revival of interest in *Wealth*.² Especially intriguing are its inconsistencies and tensions, and particularly the criticisms made throughout the play, but above all in its *agon* or formal debate, against the comic fantasy at its core: the moral redistribution of riches.³ Is Aristophanes using irony to undermine this fantasy deliberately? This question remains contested and has provoked sharply opposed stances.⁴ Some deny that there is any irony present, and interpret *Wealth* as a call for social and political change which is sympathetic to the citizens impoverished by Athens's defeat in the Peloponnesian War, whereas others see the comedy as an escape into fantasy to distract the audience from the pressing social and economic inequalities of the time.⁵ The question has been revisited so often that a number of scholars have taken a step back from it and criticize the ironic readings themselves, but the discussion remains lively.⁶ As a result, critics are again giving serious critical attention to *Wealth*, which until relatively recently was one of Aristophanes' least studied plays.⁷

The debate on the comedy has for the most part kept to the moral, social, and political ramifications of its fantasy of wealth redistribution. This is understandable, given the contemporary focus on these topics in light of the still-pressing problem of economic inequality.⁸ Religion is not something we would normally contemplate in this connection, yet it clearly plays a role in the comic fantasy of *Wealth*. For instance, the ritual establishment of the god Wealth in the home of an individual has been read as marking a breakdown of social and civic relationships in the play: Since the individual has now been made wealthy and self-sufficient, he turns his

² Flashar's brief but influential 1967 study of the play heads a series of articles, dissertations, and monographs that have done much to advance our understanding of it. Some of the most influential and frequently cited studies have been Konstan and Dillon 1981, Sommerstein 1984, and Olson 1990. See also Heberlein 1981, Dillon 1987, Bowie 1993: 268–291, Möllendorff 1995: 213–219, Newman 1999: 21–69, Sfyroeras 1995, Lévy 1997, McGlew 2002: 171–211, Zelnick-Abramovitz 2002, Willi 2003b, Fiorentini 2005, Ruffell 2006, Revermann 2006: 261–295, Zumbunnen 2012: 99–122, Tordoff 2012a, Ludwig 2014, and Orfanos 2014. The dissertations are Dillon 1984 and Tordoff 2005: 178–211. The monographs are David 1984 and Fernández 2002. For a full account of the major scholarship up to 2002, see Fernández 2002; more concise accounts are available in the recent editions of *Wealth*, Sommerstein 2001 and Torchio 2001.

³ Flashar 1967 was not the first to observe these inconsistencies. See Konstan and Dillon 1981: 378, n. 10, for the earlier scholars who took them into account.

⁴ The debate was begun by Flashar 1967.

⁵ For the first position, see Sommerstein 1984; for the second, Olson 1990. Tordoff 2005: 192–200 offers an overview of the main contributions to this debate.

⁶ Those who have taken a step back are McGlew 2002: 171–191, Ruffell 2006, Zumbunnen 2012: 99–122, and Tordoff 2012a.

⁷ McGlew 2002: 175.

⁸ On the issue of economic justice, see Zumbunnen 2006: 319–320.

back on the community.⁹ In a more optimistic interpretation, the character of Wealth has been related to the comic aspects of the god Dionysus and the festival in which the play was performed.¹⁰ These interpretations have been illuminating because they trace ritual, festival, and mythical patterns in the comedy that locate and make sense of the plot and characters within a specific religious context. Similar approaches to other comedies have been particularly fruitful for understanding the religious dimension of Old Comedy, yet it is clear that religion in Aristophanes is still a topic that merits more attention.¹¹

This current in research has for the most part reflected a preoccupation with ritual, rather than other aspects of religious life or belief. This has long been a feature of studies of Greek religion more generally, with the result that religious experiences that are not specifically related to ritual have not been sufficiently explored in Aristophanic scholarship.¹² Nevertheless, some scholars have begun to give attention to these issues, and recent studies of *Wealth* have shown how Aristophanes frames the issue of redistribution in terms of religious reciprocity, that is, the belief that the gods respond to the attentions of their worshippers, which was fundamental to Greek religion.¹³

The present book continues the conversation begun by these scholars of Aristophanes by opening up other religious patterns besides those of ritual, festival, and myth. I attend to the narratives of religious experiences that Aristophanes adapts in his comedy,¹⁴ namely divination, incubation, epiphany, and the introduction of a new god. Since the plot of the comedy dramatizes the establishment of a god in a particular location in the community, this also led me to consider spatial practices in Greek theater and religion. And, given that the new god is portrayed as a personification, I also examine Aristophanes' engagement with this mode of thought in Greek culture as well.

⁹ Bowie 1993: 290–291.

¹⁰ Sfyroeras 1995. For another festival connection of the play, see Bierl 1994.

¹¹ Studies of other comedies are provided by Auffarth 1994, 2007; Bierl 2009, 2012, 2013; Lada-Richards 1999; and Riu 1999. The need for more work on religion in Aristophanes is noted by Revermann 2014: 286 and Scullion 2014: 340.

¹² Harrison 2007: 374 has drawn attention to the “primacy of ritual in the modern study of Greek religion,” which he finds has had a limiting effect on our understanding of it: “Ritual activity is perceived as the substance of Greek religious experience,” he explains, while “conceptions of the divine [are] at best secondary and dependent on ritual.” See also the criticism and comments in Kindt 2012: 30–32, Rubel 2014: 6, 9–13, and Gagné 2015: 94–95.

¹³ Bowie 1993: 273–278, Zumbrunnen 2012: 99–108, 113–122, and Ludwig 2014.

¹⁴ This is analogous to the project of Bowie 1993: 5, who “tries to see what different structures inform and illuminate the different plays.”

The form and function of the narratives that communicate these religious experiences have received a fair amount of attention in their own right in recent research. These narratives have been shown to have recurring motifs and patterns of events, which I will discuss in detail in the chapters dedicated to each related experience. Such a pattern has been seen, in a study of oracular tales, as a mark of oral transmission, in which divinatory experiences are made to conform in the telling to a set structure of events that serves to validate the experience.¹⁵ Some of these patterns became so entrenched in the culture that they even gave rise to minor literary genres, as in the case of incubation tales and epiphanies, during the Hellenistic period.¹⁶ The pattern in these tales has even been explained as a “cultural model” that provides “a way of perceiving a phenomenon even before it is described,” or as a “learned cultural pattern” that prepared worshippers for what to expect from this experience, helping them identify and make sense of it.¹⁷ In brief, these narrative patterns provide a recognizable perspective and structure for the successful, persuasive, and even authoritative communication of their respective religious phenomena.

This recent attention to narrative has accompanied a healthy reappraisal of belief in the study of Greek religion.¹⁸ Johnston, for instance, has noted how narratives in general “contribute significantly to the sharing of ideas, beliefs, and practices that are connected with religion.”¹⁹ Yet, as Harrison points out, the role of narratives in this “transmission, reinforcement and transformation of belief” is still “underestimated” in the scholarship.²⁰ Johnston herself has already begun to address this issue in her work on mythic storytelling, as have some of the scholars that study the particular narrative patterns that concern me.²¹

¹⁵ Maurizio 1997. Cf. Giangiulio 2014.

¹⁶ See Bing 2009: 217–233 and Wickkiser 2013 for the *iamatika* genre; and Parker 2011: 10 and n. 22, and Petridou 2015: 1 and n. 3, for the *epiphaneia* genre.

¹⁷ For the “cultural model,” see Dorati and Guidorizzi 1996: 352. For the “learned cultural pattern,” see Dickie 2004: 160 and 179–180. Cf. also Gebhard 2001: 453 and Petridou 2015: 11–20. See also Sourvinou-Inwood 1991: 3–23, 244–245, and 1995: 1–9 for a broader and more sophisticated conceptualization of these cultural models.

¹⁸ For the renewed interest in narrative, see Kindt 2016b and Harrison 2015b; the latter provides an overview of recent work. For the reappraisal of belief, see Feeney 1998: 12–46, and especially Versnel 2011: 539–559, who vigorously argues for its importance. Cf. also Harrison 2015a.

¹⁹ Johnston 2017a: 141. With respect to Greek religion, Kindt came up with the concept of the “theology of the story,” which refers to “the way in which in the ancient Greek world, views about the nature of the gods and their availability to human knowledge were articulated not only explicitly in critical discourse but also, and perhaps above all, in narrative form: as stories” (2016b: 13). See the comments of Harrison 2015b on this concept.

²⁰ Harrison 2015a: 26.

²¹ Although a “systematic and comprehensive” treatment is still required (Kindt 2016a: 155), there has been no lack of work on the topic: to name a few, see the recent studies of Johnston 2015a and 2015b,

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On oracular tales, for example, Maurizio has argued that the process of “structuration” of oracular experiences to fit the narrative pattern “demands that we consider seriously the religious beliefs that informed their transmission.”²² In the chapters that follow, I follow the example of these scholars and give serious attention to some of the beliefs associated with the patterns that concern me: How oracle stories convey the idea that one can communicate with divinities; how incubation tales attest to the conviction that worshippers can come into direct contact with a deity in dreams, who would then cure their ills; how stories of the introduction of new gods testify to the belief that individuals or communities could establish a beneficial relationship with an outside deity who sought to be established among them; and how the belief in religious reciprocity that I mentioned above, and the related idea that gods care for men, pervade all of these examples and constitute an overarching theme of *Wealth*. In addition, I touch upon a few psychological states that recur in the narratives of these experiences, such as perplexity, in the case of oracular stories; amazement, in the case of epiphany; and anxiety, in the case of new god tales, which can also be related to the issue of belief. In this respect, I follow Harrison’s call for a broader understanding of belief, one that would encompass emotions in additions to issues of trust and knowledge of the divine.²³

Aristophanes employs these narrative patterns, and the beliefs and expectations they convey, for his own creative and comic purposes, much like he does with the mythic and ritual patterns.²⁴ He often elaborates, subverts, or even innovates on them: At times he parodies their original function; at times he embraces it; often he does both at once. More significantly, he “performs” these narratives, working on them “experimentally and constructively” to give them a dramatic meaning that is pertinent to the genre, as Auffarth has argued regarding his use of ritual.²⁵ To determine how he dramatizes these narrative patterns, the chapters that follow will compare his versions with those from sources outside comedy, in particular epigraphic material from Classical and Hellenistic sanctuaries, which can give us a sense of the shape and function of these narratives in a specifically

in relation to myth; Kindt 2016a, regarding oracular narratives; Petridou 2015, on epiphanies; and in general Kindt 2012: 36–54. Recent collections of essays are offered by Eidinow, Kindt, and Osborne 2016, on narrative and Greek religion, and Johnston 2017b, on religion in general.

²² Maurizio 1997: 312.

²³ Harrison 2015a: 25.

²⁴ On Aristophanes’ use of ritual, Graf 2007: 61 notes its use “as a tool to shape the audience’s expectations and perceptions.”

²⁵ Auffarth 2007: 393, 407–409.

religious context.²⁶ Since the playwright deftly blends these patterns with generic features of Old Comedy, such as prologues and messenger speeches, it is also pertinent to consider how these structural elements influence his treatment. By contrasting Aristophanes' versions with the original story patterns of religious experience, my study seeks to illuminate how the genre creates its own type of religious discourse, one that is in dialogue with other accounts of the same experience, including those of different genres.²⁷ For *Wealth* is not merely a fantasy based on humorous dramatizations of religious experiences and beliefs, but also a participant in that "mobile set of discourses with varying degrees of overlap and competition" that constitutes "[t]he field which modern scholars call 'Athenian religion,'" which includes "the overlapping and competing discourses we call 'literature'."²⁸ The healing stories of Asclepius found in Epidauros and Aristophanes' own narrative version of this experience both form part of a larger system of narratives associated with the god and his miraculous treatments, which we must attend to if we are to understand Greek religious beliefs and how they are handled in comedy.

In stating that *Wealth* is an example of religious discourse, I do not mean that comedy itself is religious in nature. I am aware that scholars have argued this point from the genre's ritual origin and festival context,²⁹ but I wish to keep my study independent of this approach in order to concentrate on the religious connections that the play makes on its own. Nor am I stating that *all* Aristophanic Comedy participates in religious discourse: The genre of Old Comedy is remarkably heterogeneous, featuring plays where religion is arguably absent, such as *Assemblywomen*, and plays in which it has an important role, such as *Birds*, *Clouds*, *Peace*, and *Women at the Thesmophoria*. What I mean is that I will be treating *Wealth* in particular as a dramatic fiction whose plot is thoroughly engaged with religious issues.

This religious framework of *Wealth* is not unique. Stories of the introductions of new gods structure the plot of *Peace* as well, as we will see. And one can also find, among the fragments of comedies produced in the fifth and fourth century BC, tantalizing glimpses of plays whose plots seem to hinge on some of the religious phenomena studied in this book.³⁰ Newly

²⁶ See Johnston 2017a: 150–151 for the comparative approach to Greek religion.

²⁷ See Kindt 2016b: 14–15.

²⁸ Feeney 1998: 25.

²⁹ Recent examples are Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 172–177 and Revermann 2014: 277–281. See also Brelich 1969.

³⁰ See Bowie 2010 for a survey of comedies, fragmentary and complete, that can be connected to specific myths, rituals, festivals, and a few of the religious experiences mentioned above.

arrived gods, for instance, appear as characters in Aristophanes' *Seasons* (test. *ii and fr. 581 *PCG*) and perhaps in Eupolis' *Dyers* (test. iia and d, and fr. *93 *PCG*). Snippets of narratives of miracle cures can be found in Aristophanes' *Amphiaraios* (fr. *21 and 22 *PCG*), Antiphanes' *Mendicant Priest of Cybele* (fr. 152 *PCG*), and possibly in his *Asclepius* as well (fr. 47 *PCG*). An oracular consultation might have featured in the plots of two comedies called *Trophonios*, written by Cratinus and Alexis, since their action took place in Boeotia (Cratinus fr. *235 and Alexis fr. 239 *PCG*), the site of the oracular shrine of the title character. These glimpses suggest that *Wealth*, far from being an outlier, can instead be considered an example of what might have been a common type of comic plot, one based on stories of these kinds of encounters with the divine.

Comedy's mocking treatment of religion can be perplexing, so I will clarify my approach to this issue. I do not consider such treatment to be irreligious.³¹ It has recently been shown that mocking deities is traditional not only to Greek literature beyond comedy, but also to Mediterranean religions more broadly,³² and that humor is integral to certain Greek rituals and festivals, including the one in which comedy was performed.³³ Further, I do not believe that Aristophanes' mockery reflects a generalized crisis of religious belief in Athens during the Peloponnesian War.³⁴ Recent studies have argued that there is a strong continuity in religious practice and belief across the fifth and fourth centuries BC,³⁵ and that the famous religious crises and scandals of the period should be understood within the framework of a vigorous and complex religious system which made room for change and innovation while at the same time affirming and defending tradition.³⁶

More significant is the question of just how 'seriously' one should take comedy's presentation of religious experiences and beliefs. Does comedy provide a merely fictional portrayal, one to be treated as separate from

³¹ Scullion 2014: 347–348 gives a useful overview of the discussions concerning the treatment of the gods in Greek comedy; see also the excellent summary of earlier views in Hoffman 1974. Thankfully, the idea that Aristophanes is irreligious has fallen out of favor (Parker 2005: 149). It might have been based on Christian prejudices regarding the incompatibility of humor with religion, and Goldhill 2016 examines how these prejudices have manifested themselves in the scholarship of Greek tragedy.

³² Graf 2007: 66 and Revermann 2014: 276 are recent examples, but see already Hoffman 1974.

³³ See Hewitt 1917: 183–184, Carrière 1983: 51–52, Parker 2005: 149, Halliwell 2008: 155–214, and Csapo 2016.

³⁴ Brelich 1969: 24, n. 17 and Hoffman 1974 summarize earlier views linking comedy to religious decline. See also Mikalson 1983: 110–113.

³⁵ For example, Mikalson 1983: 110–118, Yunis 1988: 26–27, Auffarth 1995, Flower 2009, and Rubel 2014: 157–158.

³⁶ For tradition and innovation, see the overview of Kearns 2015. I will return to this topic in Chapter 5.

‘real’ religion?³⁷ Sourvinou-Inwood argued that the gods in Greek comedy are “comic constructs.” In her view, the fact that Aristophanic comedy often refers to itself metatheatrically as a performance “does not entail that representations of the gods in comedy were accurate reflections of the real gods of lived religion,” since in that case the gods would have been exposed as dramatic fictions.³⁸ For her, the audience’s awareness that what they are watching is not a representation of actual divinities was what allowed comedy to treat gods, festivals, and rituals irreverently. Yet she also notes that these comic constructs are not “insulated from the real world of the polis,” and that in order to understand their humor one has to reconstruct the religious assumptions that underpin them.³⁹ For instance, Aristophanes’ *Women at the Thesmophoria* presents its audience with a comic version of an actual religious festival. How the play’s depiction of the festival reflects the latter is still debated,⁴⁰ yet one must assume that the audience would have had to share at least some common assumptions about the actual religious festival in order to appreciate what the playwright is doing in his humorous adaptation.

Sourvinou-Inwood’s acknowledgment of the cultural context of humor would seem to run counter to her idea that the comic construct does not reflect actual religion,⁴¹ yet it is important to keep her distinction in mind, not merely as a measure of caution when using Greek comedy as evidence for the religion of the time, but also as an important step towards understanding how the genre plays a role in actual religious discourse. I agree that its treatment of religion is ‘constructed,’ but I believe that this, precisely, is the way in which the genre participates in religious discourse, namely by exploring and even performing familiar issues within a distinct imaginative space, that of comic fantasy, with all the incongruities and distortions that the latter introduces into the process.⁴² If Aristophanes’ humorous intervention in Plato’s *Symposium* is any indication, comedy was certainly welcomed as an interlocutor in dialogues concerning the divine, taking its place among tragedy, medicine, and philosophy.⁴³ Consequently,

³⁷ With respect to tragedy, Mikalson 1991 is perhaps the most often quoted representative of this view, though it has received much criticism: for instance, Feeney 1998: 24–25, Sourvinou-Inwood 1997: 164–170 and 2003: 5–6, and Harrison 2007: 373–374.

³⁸ Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 53. See in general 52–53 and 172–177.

³⁹ Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 177; see also 294–295. On the possibility of recuperating these perspectives, see for instance Easterling 1985: 44, Pelling 1997, Versnel 1998: 100–102, Harrison 2007, and in particular Scullion 2014, who attends in his discussion to the difficulties involved.

⁴⁰ Recent contributions are Bowie 1993: 205–217, Habash 1997, Tzanetou 2002, and Bierl 2009: 83–265.

⁴¹ See for instance the criticism in Miles 2011.

⁴² Cf. Riu 1999: 40–41, 229–232 and Ambler 2013: 4–5.

⁴³ Ambler 2013: 5–6 and Gagné 2015: 86.

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I will consider comedy “an agent of religious thought,” and Aristophanes’ treatment of religion, a “legitimate religious expression.”⁴⁴ This perspective on the positive relationship of humor to religion is now widely accepted outside the field of Classics, particularly in humor studies.⁴⁵

My first chapter, dedicated to personifications, flags up the issues raised by the religious dimension of the play and its treatment in scholarship. Scholars tend to see characters such as Wealth and Peace in Aristophanes’ comedies primarily as literary devices. This approach yields a rather limited reading, since it does not take full account of the fact that personifications in Greek thought could also be the manifestations of actual supernatural entities. In order to make this point, I consider recent studies that address the problematic status of personifications as divinities in visual representations.⁴⁶ I argue that, if we are to approximate the original audience’s understanding of the play, the character of Wealth should be understood as a supernatural power. The image and myths crafted by Aristophanes for this god introduce the theme of beneficial divinities into the play.

Chapter 2 turns to oracular consultations. Aristophanes fuses the expository function of the comic prologue with the story pattern related to these divinatory experiences, particularly to the process of their interpretation. His purpose is to introduce his comic plot as a collaborative creation authored by both gods and men: The characters join forces to interpret an oracle of Apollo, from which they concoct the plan to heal Wealth. Apollo himself, through the revelation of his divine will, also participates in the creation and fulfillment of the comic fantasy, sanctioning it in his role as advisor to men and as a beneficial deity who helps their endeavors.

The third chapter focuses on the traditional healing stories associated with the experience of incubation at the sanctuaries of Asclepius. The pattern of these stories provides the template for the messenger speech that reports on the healing of Wealth in the comedy. Aristophanes adopts and expands the religious purpose of these texts, which is to proclaim the god’s goodwill towards his suppliants. At the same time, and in tune with his craft, the playwright transforms the figure of Asclepius: He endows the god’s action in the comedy with a political and symbolic dimension that transcends the individual miracle, thereby giving a new meaning to his traditional portrayal as a kindly deity.

⁴⁴ The first quote is from Gagné 2015: 84, and the second from Gilhus 1997: 12. See also Harrison 2007: 374 and Kindt 2016a: 11.

⁴⁵ See for instance Berger 1997, Gardner 2005, and the essays in Hyers 1969.

⁴⁶ Stafford 2000, 2007; and Borg 2005.

The following two chapters are dedicated to the arrival of the god Wealth in the community. Chapter 4 examines how his reception and epiphany redefines the performance space of the play: When the god is welcomed into Chremylos' household and manifests his powers, a private, domestic space is transformed into a public, religious one. This space is then set in opposition to important offstage sacred and civic spaces, as all worshippers now relocate their ritual activities, such as sacrifice and dedications, to the place where the new divinity Wealth resides. In addition to exploring the connection of Wealth's epiphany inside the household, which is related in a messenger speech, to other narratives of this particular religious experience, I also attend to the fluidity of Aristophanes' treatment of space, which is essential to understanding the spatial conflict that erupts between new and established cults. A semiotic approach to theatrical space provides me with a theoretical framework able to account for the transformation wrought by Wealth's epiphany.⁴⁷

The fifth and last chapter turns to stories related to the introduction of new gods into a community. *Wealth's* comic fantasy is established and explored through this narrative pattern, presenting the plot as the outcome, once again, of the collaboration of divine agents and their mortal sponsors, and as a significant event in the religious life of the community. The pattern brings with it anxieties, particularly in relation to how new cults disrupt established ones, but also hope, in the definition of the new arrival as a philanthropic and salvific divinity by association with similar gods already present in the polis, such as Asclepius. The comedy reconciles the tension between new and established gods by enshrining the new philanthropic cults within civic religious practice.

In my conclusion, I examine the larger issue of how *Wealth* engages with the religious life of its times, by focusing on the miraculous nature of the comic fantasy and on the belief in reciprocity that informs it – two elements that have previously been interpreted in a skeptical and ironic light. *Wealth*, I argue, offers a celebratory and hopeful vision of human and divine interaction that reflects the rise in popularity of philanthropic deities in Athens, while at the same time making room for skepticism, incongruities, and impossibilities, which are no strangers to the other religious discourses of the time. In this way, the playwright's craft testifies to a salutary bond between humor and religion, bringing together the incongruous nature of humor with that of the miraculous.

⁴⁷ Lowe 1988, 2006; Revermann 2006; and McAuley 1999.