

COMIC ACTS

A. H. Sommerstein has recently directed our attention away from the belaboured topic of the essential and original structure of Old Comedy to the more productive question of how the extant plays of Aristophanes are shaped.¹ He begins with the question of the source of 'the five-act principle, standard in Menandrian comedy' (140). Correctly looking to the chorus as the key element in articulating a play's form, Sommerstein finds that the five-act format already dominates the shape of Old Comedy, although he argues that the number of acts ranges from four to seven and that only in the fourth century do the acts become about the same length.² His analysis is largely correct, I think, but it is in danger of being ignored because his criteria are not objective and have not been applied systematically. Thus, B. Zimmermann has more recently described the structure of Aristophanic comedy as free:³

Aristofane disponga liberamente degli elementi compositori e delle rispettive forme, e non si trovi di conseguenza costretto da una tradizione del genere letterario a valersi di determinati elementi in determinate sedi della commedia (54).

Yet Zimmermann himself speaks of the two typical halves of a comedy (the first comprising prologue and parodos) and remarks that the function of choral lyric changes dramatically after the parabasis, which separates the two parts ('al centro ed al vertice della commedia' 50). These two rather different approaches can, I think, be reconciled if we pay attention to the same sorts of distinctive markers we find in tragedy – parodos and stasimon – with the addition of the parabasis, a unique and defining part of every comedy.⁴

First let us consider Sommerstein's criteria. He begins with a discussion of Aristophanes' last two plays where he defines an act-division 'in the Menandrian way, as a point at which the stage is empty of actors, the chorus perform, and a period of time is imagined to elapse' (141). Since there are virtually no markers of choral performance in these two plays, Sommerstein is forced to rely on empty stage and elapsed time for his criteria, which is unfortunate because in tragedy neither appears to be a reliable criterion.⁵ More important, as far as we can tell they are not reliable criteria in Menander's comedies either.⁶ Moreover, Sommerstein is not able to apply

¹ A. H. Sommerstein, 'Act Division in Old Comedy', *BICS* 31 (1984), 139–52.

² 'According to the criteria we have adopted, we find that Aristophanes' fifth-century plays can be divided into a number of acts that ranges from four to seven but is most commonly five (in five plays out of nine) ... The length of the first act varies only between 203 and 322 lines, and the last, except in *Clouds*, is always short (34 to 106 lines), but the length of intermediate acts varies very widely' (150).

³ B. Zimmermann, 'L'Organizzazione interna delle Commedie di Aristofane', *Dioniso* 57 (1987), 49–64.

⁴ By 'stasimon' I mean strophic choral song.

⁵ See O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 110–12 on empty stage ('at a rough estimate an actor remains during one in three of all act-dividing songs', p. 111) and pp. 291–4 on time-lapse ('in the whole of surviving tragedy the only explicit time lapse is at *A. Eum* 234/5', p. 291). R. T. Weissinger, *A Study of Act Divisions in Classical Drama* (*Iowa Studies in Classical Philology* 9 [1940]), p. 25 gives the following statistics for empty stage: 4 × during parodos, 17 during the first stasimon, 18 during the second, 18 during the third and 13 during the fourth. Since he is considering 33 tragedies, Taplin's one-third does not seem to be an exaggeration.

⁶ To take only the one virtually complete play, *Dyskolos*, we find empty stage with choral interlude four times and without choral interlude seven times. At least one of the latter, the rescue of Knemon (*Dys.* 665), involves the passage of time and there are several others which

these criteria systematically and come up with the five-act division he seeks. Thus he finds that the stage is empty at seven points during the course of *Plutus* and at five points during *Ecclesiastusae*, but to get five acts he can accept only four such divisions in each. His reasons for rejecting the others are not particularly cogent. He rejects *Pl.* 958, 1170 and *Ecc.* 729 because there is no time-lapse, but he accepts *Pl.* 321 where 'there is no substantial lapse of time' and *Pl.* 1096 where a time-lapse can be imagined but is not indicated. Also he rejects *Pl.* 770, despite its choral performance, because 'it would leave 771–801 as an extremely short act' (142), though length of act was not one of the criteria he had mentioned before.⁷ Similarly it is on the basis of length that he criticizes Hunter's conclusion that *Ecc.* 729 marks a choral performance. Hunter had argued that in Greek Comedy 'exit and re-entry of the same character or characters to an otherwise empty stage are separated by act-break'.⁸ In opposition, Sommerstein argues that 'it is possible that the chorus sing briefly, as they do in some other plays where a character has gone inside to fetch something and left the chorus alone (for instance, *Ach.* 358–365, *Peace* 950–5); but any substantial choral performance would be out of place' (144). One may question how different in performance the seven-line song of *Ach.* 358 is from the twelve lines of *Birds* 1553 or *Birds* 1694, both of which, as we will see, Sommerstein considers act-dividing.

When we turn to Sommerstein's analysis of Aristophanes' fifth-century plays, we find a similar inconsistency. He establishes act-divisions with the following assumptions (145):

(a) The parodos, the parabasis, and the second parabasis if any are always act-divisions. (b) If a choral song covers a lapse of time, it must be an act-divider. (c) Except in the parodos, actors do not take part in act-dividing performances, and normally no actor is on stage.

The first criterion is the least problematic. The entry of the chorus was already considered an act-divider in the *Poetics*, and the illusion-breaking nature of the parabasis makes it a self-evident structural break. Both parodos and parabasis occur in virtually all Aristophanes' extant comedies and Sommerstein's 'always' underlines the important fact that both are exclusive – every parodos and every parabasis will be an act-divider. The 'second parabasis' does not always occur and is not as clearly defined. Still, if we compare those listed by Sommerstein with others, we will find almost complete agreement that *Knights*, *Clouds*,⁹ *Wasps*, *Peace* and *Birds* all have second parabases (Table 1).¹⁰

may as well (392, 521). By contrast only two of the four choral interludes involve time lapse (at 232 Daos fetches Gorgias; at 783 Sostratos talks to his father). It is probably significant that in both cases the time lapse is made obvious by the re-entry of the character who last exited. Thus, while a choral interlude always occurs with empty stage, the reverse is not at all true and, while time lapse sometimes occurs during a choral interlude, it does not always.

⁷ The equivalence in length of the acts of *Dyskolos* (232–194–193–164–186) makes such an assumption understandable, but we can see from the fragments of the *Samia* that its Act III (over 215 lines) was almost twice as long as its Act V (122). What Sommerstein says about the first four acts (150) applies as well to the fifth: the range in act-length decreases from Aristophanes' fifth-century plays (75–693) to his fourth-century plays (175–373) and in Menander is even smaller (122–280).

⁸ R. L. Hunter, 'The Comic Chorus in the Fourth Century', *ZPE* 36 (1979), 23–38, pp. 24–5. Sommerstein argues, against Hunter, that there is no time lapse here, which only shows how subjective this criterion is.

⁹ Gelzer says 1131 but he means 1113, as his analysis of the *Clouds* (1445) makes clear. Also he includes *Peace* 1127 in his analysis (1460) but not his list.

¹⁰ T. Zielinski, *Die Gliederung der altattischen Komödie* (Leipzig, 1885), pp. 213–15; A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy* (Oxford, 1962), p. 198; T. Gelzer, 'Aristophanes der Komiker', *RE* Supplement XII (1971), col. 1520.

Table 1. *Comparison of listings of second parabasis*

Second parabasis	Zielinski	Pickard-Cambridge	Gelzer	Sommerstein
<i>Acharnians</i> 971	x			x
<i>Acharnians</i> 1143			x	
<i>Knights</i> 1264	x	x	x	x
<i>Clouds</i> 1113	x	x	x	x
<i>Wasps</i> 1265	x	x	x	x
<i>Peace</i> 1127	x	x	x	x
<i>Birds</i> 1058	x	x	x	x

The third criterion, too, is widely recognized. Already in the *Poetics* we find the distinction made between a song by the chorus alone and songs involving actors, and we can see that in tragedy this distinction has empirical validity and considerable interpretative power.¹¹ None of Sommerstein's act-dividing songs involves an actor,¹² but the converse is not true: there are some songs without actors which Sommerstein has not included: *Kn.* 973, *Cl.* 804,¹³ *Birds* 627,¹⁴ *Th.* 655,¹⁵ *Frogs* 1099. Since only one of these (*Cl.* 804) occurs when the stage is empty of actors, empty stage must be the more important part of the third criterion.¹⁶

The importance of an empty stage is difficult to verify, and we have already seen the problems it can cause. Sommerstein himself allows parodoi as exceptions (though not every parodos is an exception) as well as two examples in the *Thesmophoriazusae* (785, 1136), where the protagonist is 'immobile for long periods' (146). Yet, the protagonist does exit between these two lyrics, and so this argument is weak. Also, there may be other cases, even among those songs Sommerstein considers act-dividing, where there may be an actor present, though not singing: he admits that at *Birds* 1553 'it would be natural enough for the arrival of the divine embassy to follow directly' (147),¹⁷ and, if we allow a comic character to suggest exiting but then not do so, *Peace* 1316 is a further example: Trygaeus having suggested exiting in 1302 is still present at 1315 when the chorus sings to bring out the bride, and is present at 1329 calling the bride out.¹⁸ Conversely, Sommerstein himself points to three places he has

¹¹ See R. Hamilton, 'Announced Entrances in Greek Tragedy', *HSCP* 82 (1978), 63–82, pp. 72–3. Taplin, following Dale, is rightly critical of the definition of stasimon in the *Poetics*, but at the same time recognizes the validity of its modern definition as strophic choral song: 'there is only one strophic choral lyric which definitely does not divide two acts (*A. Hik* 418ff.)' (p. 51).

¹² As Sommerstein notes, this is not true of the parodos, but that is immaterial since the parodos is defined as the entry of the chorus, not its first song (though, as a consequence, it is difficult to say when the parodos ends).

¹³ Sommerstein says *Cl.* 804 does not 'amount to an act-break', presumably because of its length, which is only seven lines.

¹⁴ Apparently this is one of the 'scene-dividing as distinct from act-dividing, songs' which 'are not structurally significant and may be included or omitted at the author's option' (148), though it is not said how we can tell.

¹⁵ 'It might possibly be maintained that 655–686 should be classified as an act-dividing song... but there is never an act-break between the parodos and the parabasis' (146).

¹⁶ And the more inclusive part since by definition empty stage requires that 'actors do not take part'.

¹⁷ The problem of getting cooking paraphernalia on stage is hardly sufficient reason to posit Peisetairos' exit and re-entry without some marker in the text.

¹⁸ Sommerstein (148) speaks of a 'break between 1310 and 1316 during which no actor is on stage' but he must mean 1316 and 1328. Both before and after the song at 1316 Trygaeus invites the chorus to eat *plakountes* (1314, 1356). The absence of any mention of exiting to don a γαμικὴ χλαμὶς (contrast *Birds* 1693) may be a further indication that Trygaeus does not exit.

not included where the chorus sing to an empty stage, *Acharnians* 358, *Peace* 950 and *Peace* 1033, to which we may add *Clouds* 804.¹⁹ His argument for excluding the three exceptions is, once again, appeal to the doubtful criterion of length. A final problem with empty stage is that once again more exceptions must be allowed than there are places where this criterion is crucial.²⁰

The second criterion – lapse of time – is the weakest of the three. In the first place, there is often no explicit reference to a lapse of time, and only considerably after the start of the next scene would the audience realize that time has passed.²¹ Furthermore, many of Sommerstein's act-dividers do *not* cover a time-lapse:²² *Ach.* 204, 626, 836, 971; *Kn.* 247; *Cl.* 275; *Wasps* 230; *Peace* 301, 1127; *Birds* 267, 1470?, 1553; *Lys.* 254, 781; *Th.* 295, 1136; *Frogs* 323, 814. In fact time-lapse is important in only seven cases: *Ach.* 1183, *Cl.* 1303, *Birds* 1470, 1694, *Lys.* 1014, 1189 and *Frogs* 1480. Finally, actions requiring lapse of time occur not only at act-divisions but sometimes within acts: *Ach.* 178 (Amphitheus' offstage trip to Sparta); *Ach.* 394/485 (trip to/from Euripides' house); *Peace* 174 (trip to heaven), 868 (offstage bath and wedding preparations); *Th.* 279 (trip to Thesmophoria); *Frogs* 180 (trip to lake).

If there are meaningful act-dividers in Aristophanic comedy – and we must remember that we are obliged to show that our act-dividers *are* meaningful – they must be immediately apprehensible, unambiguous and distinctive. The entry of the chorus has all three qualities. The entry of twenty-four identically masked individuals is immediately recognizable and unambiguous, fortunately, since the song of the parodos is not formally distinctive and often an actor will participate extensively in it.²³ The entry is also distinctive – the chorus enters only once.²⁴

¹⁹ Socrates must have exited before 866, when he is called out of the Thinkery, and he is addressed in the third person at 830. The chorus addresses him in the second person at 808, perhaps as he is leaving, or this may be like the rather numerous choral addresses in tragedy to a non-present actor (see Taplin, p. 281).

²⁰ Empty stage is the *only* criterion marking two songs as act-dividers in Sommerstein's analysis (*Th.* 947, *Frogs* 814), though two others (*Ach.* 836, *Wasps* 1450) could be added. Weissinger (38) calculates that 10 of 17 comic stasima have empty stage.

²¹ In the cases where time has passed during a choral song there usually has been some off-stage action and one could argue that it is the action not the time that is being marked: *Ach.* 1143 (expeditions); *Kn.* 498 (Council), 1264 (Demos cooked); *Cl.* 510 (Strepsiades instructed), 1115 (Pheidippides instructed), 1303 (Strepsiades beaten); *Wasps* 1009 (Philocleon dressed), 1265 (symposium and komos), 1450 (party); *Peace* 729 (trip to earth); *Birds* 676 (meal), 1058 (sacrifice; wall building), 1694 (trip to get Basilinna); *Lys.* 1014 (Spartan embassy), 1189 (feast); *Th.* 947 (Mnesilochos bound), *Frogs* 674 (Dionysus judged), 1482 (feast).

²² We may compare Weissinger's statement (41) that 23 of the 26 time-lapses in comedy occur during a parabasis or stasimon, which means that time-lapse occurs during about two-thirds of the act-dividers (5 acts in 9 plays requires 36 act-dividers).

²³ This is not certain for *Birds*, where an increasing minority of scholars think the first four birds, all fantastic and all carefully described, belong to the chorus. See G. M. Sifakis, *Parabasis and Animal Choruses* (London, 1971), p. 126 n. 5 for a list of disputants and add L. M. Stone, *Costume in Aristophanic Comedy* (New York, 1981), pp. 355–6, J. R. Green, 'A Representation of the *Birds* of Aristophanes', *Greek Vases in the J. Paul Getty Museum* 2 (1985), p. 117 and O. Taplin, 'Phallogogy, *Phylakes*, Iconography and Aristophanes', *PCPS* 33 (1987), p. 94. We should not think that the 24 individual names in 297–304, which most critics take to be the 24 members of the chorus, require that the chorus be individually masked any more than the individually named chorus members of *Wasps* and *Lysistrata* need wear different masks. Likewise, we should not confuse the chorus of women in the *Thesmophoriazusae* with the individual actors.

²⁴ In *Frogs* there is a second chorus and it is not absolutely clear, despite gallons of scholarly ink, how that is managed. If the frog chorus is offstage there will be no confusion; if it appears on stage, its parodos will be 'duplicated' by the parodos of the mystics fifty lines later and so the confusion is only momentary.

Like the parodos, the parabasis is immediate, unambiguous and distinctive. The markers of the parabasis are: explicit address of audience, metatheatrical self-reference and change of costume.²⁵ All three are not always present, but there is no question what each play's parabasis is, even when it is modified as in the *Lysistrata*. Both parodos and parabasis are found in all the fifth-century plays of Aristophanes, and are found only once. In the first five plays after *Acharnians* there is a second choral song with some characteristics of a parabasis, as we have seen, and these too probably serve a structural function.

If we turn to the other choral songs, we will find that most of those not involving actors follow the tragic arrangement of 'stasima', that is, they are in strophic form (where the antistrophe follows the strophe directly or almost directly) and they are, unlike tragedy, virtually always preceded by the exit and followed by the entrance of an actor:²⁶ *Acharnians* 836 (SSSS not SA)²⁷, 971, 1143; *Knights* 973; *Clouds* 1303; *Wasps* 1450; *Birds* 1470; *Thesmophoriazusae* 947, 1136; *Lysistrata* 781 (semi-chorus dialogue); *Frogs* 814 (SSSS), 1482.

If we then combine parodos, parabasis, second parabasis and these 'stasima' we have the following acts:²⁸

Acharnians	1-203	237-625	719-835	860-970	1000-1142	1174-1234
Knights	1-246	255-497	611-972	997-1263	1316-1408	
Clouds	1-274	291-509	627-1114	1131-1302	1321-1511	
Wasps	1-229	316-1008	1122-1264	1292-1449	1474-1537	
Peace	1-300	308-728	819-1126	1191-1357		
Birds	1-309?	310-675	801-1057	1118-1469	1494-1765	
Lysistrata	1-253	350-613	706-780	829-1042	1072-1320	
Thesmo.	1-294	331-784	846-946	1001-1135	1160-1231	
Frogs	1-315?	460-673	738-813	839-1481	1550-1533	

Let us juxtapose this with Sommerstein's arrangement, italicizing significant differences:²⁹

Acharnians	1-203	241-625	719-835	860-970	1000-1142	1174-1234
Knights	1-241	278-497	<i>611-1263</i>	1316-1408		
Clouds	1-274	356-509	627-1112	1131-1302	1321-1511	
Wasps	1-229	316-1008	1122-1264	1291-1449	1474-1537	
Peace	1-300	361-728	819-1126	<i>1191-1310</i>	1329-1357	
Birds	1-266	434-675	801-1057	1118-1469	<i>1494-1552</i>	<i>1565-1693</i> 1706-1765
Lysistrata	1-253	387-613	706-780	829-1013	<i>1072-1188</i>	1216-1320
Thesmo.	1-294	373-784	846-946	1001-1135	1160-1231	
Frogs	1-322	460-673	738-813	830-1481	1500-1533	

²⁵ For the formal characteristics, see e.g. Pickard-Cambridge, pp. 197-9.

²⁶ *Wasps* 1516 and *Frogs* 1099 are the only comic stasima that lack exit and entrance of an actor. Since the former (a 'Choral finale' according to Pickard-Cambridge, p. 220) ends its play, it seems reasonable to treat the latter as anomalous also, and so I have excluded it from the list of act-dividing stasima. Almost every example listed here (not *Lys.* 781) is labelled 'stasimon' by Pickard-Cambridge (213-28). Twice the strophe and antistrophe are separated by well over a hundred lines, effectively transforming their status (*Birds* 1553 = 1694, *Lys.* 1014 = 1189). One purely choral song is not strophic: *Peace* 1316.

²⁷ It would be convenient for the five-act theory to exclude *Ach.* 836 but since SS (matching stanzas) would be perceived as SA (strophe-antistrophe) the continuation of the matching pattern of *Ach.* 836 and *Frogs* 814 is more a 'bonus' than an exception.

²⁸ For the question-marks at the parodoi of *Birds* and *Frogs* see above nn. 23, 24.

²⁹ As Sommerstein (150) notes regarding the second act, 'it is often hard to specify precisely where that act begins'. He seems to depend on a shift in focus while I mark where the chorus engages an actor, hence the numerous slight and occasional large discrepancies in our numbers. These differences will affect only our interpretation of the length of the second act, which does not seem particularly noteworthy in either analysis.

Table 2. *Length of Acts*

Act	Range	Mean	Mean Deviation
first	203–309	269	32.4 (12%)
second	214–693	363	113.3 (31.2%)
third	75–488	214	123.3 (57.6%)
fourth	111–652	248	117.6 (47.4%)
fifth	34–272	140	74.1 (52.9%)
first	203–322	265	29.4 (11.1%)
second	154–693	323	124.3 (38.5%)
third	75–486	257	171.6 (66.8%)
fourth	93–652	220	125.6 (57.1%)
fifth	29–191	89	46.4 (52.1%)

The only differences from Sommerstein's arrangement are the addition of *Kn.* 973 and the omission of *Peace* 1316, *Birds* 1553, 1694, *Lys.* 1189. But these few changes mean we now have only one play with fewer than five acts (*Peace*) and only one with more (*Acharnians*) whereas Sommerstein was left with one four-act play (*Knights*), two six-act plays (*Acharnians*, *Lysistrata*) and one seven-act play (*Birds*). The chronological development in our scheme is more orderly as well: 6-5-5-5-4-5-5-5-5 versus 6-4-5-5-5-7-6-5-5. Since our six-act play, *Acharnians*, is also the first extant play by Aristophanes, we can without embarrassment explain it as a predecessor of the five-act format.³⁰

If we look at length, we find that in both schemes only the length of first act shows limited range (Table 2).³¹ In either scheme the first act has a notably low deviation and the fifth has a much smaller mean.

Position seems extremely variable according to either scheme. Naturally the first act, relatively fixed in length and always beginning at line 1, is also fixed in position, but otherwise the acts seem to overlap as we can see when the range is represented graphically:³²

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first act: 1-----315/322
second act: 237/241-----1008
third act:           611-----1264
fourth act:           829-----1481
fifth act:           1000-----1765/1552.
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The major advantage of using 'stasimon' along with parodos and parabasis rather than Sommerstein's criteria of choral song, lapse of time and empty stage is that we are now assured of criteria which are perceptible, unambiguous and consistent. We might notice that we have ended up including Zimmermann's basic units. Whichever system we use, it should be clear how close to the five-act norm all the fifth-century plays are.

What then about the fourth-century plays with which Sommerstein began? In both *Ecclesiazusae* and *Plutus* there is a striking departure from previous practice – acts are divided by interludes marked in the text only by *XOPOY*. Thus in *Ecclesiazusae* we find two interludes in addition to a parodos and an epiparodos (but no parabasis),

³⁰ The anomalous four-act *Peace* has no such obvious explanation, but the problem it poses seems a legitimate one.

³¹ Zimmermann (51) notes that the parodos always occurs after line 200; Sommerstein (150) that the first act 'varies only between 203 and 322 lines'.

³² When there is disagreement, Sommerstein's numbers are placed second.

and in the *Plutus* the parodos is explicitly replaced by an interlude, which is followed by three other interludes. In both cases by accepting the manuscript designations we end up with five-act plays.

The *Ecclesiazusae* pattern is fairly straightforward. The earliest and best manuscript, the Ravennas, marks choral interludes at 729 and 826. As we have seen Hunter noted that at 729 a character's exit is immediately followed by his re-entry and so an interlude is required.³³ To these 'new comedy' divisions we should add, as does Sommerstein, two of the old markers: the first choral song (a sort of 'anti-parodos') and the second entry of the chorus. The second entry of the chorus is the less problematic: several tragedies contain such an epiparodos and it is by its nature (entry of the chorus) clearly a structural marker. In addition, the epiparodos of the *Ecclesiazusae* is, after a short introduction, cast in strophic form and so its function as an act-divider is doubly determined. The parodos of the *Ecclesiazusae* is really a sort of anti-parodos. The chorus have entered apparently one by one and so, in Sommerstein's words, 'it is by no means evident that they are the chorus' (144). They group to sing only as they leave the orchestra, and it is this song which must be perceived by the audience as a break.³⁴

In *Plutus* the rejection of the parodos is even more obvious. The chorus do not make a separate entrance but have been fetched by Kario, with whom they enter and who initiates the dialogue when they enter. Further, the entry is in stichic iambs for over thirty lines before it becomes lyric (and even here it is still dialogue). At its end, Kario addresses the chorus to explain the upcoming exit and commands that they stop the jokes and move to another form of song (ἐπ' ἄλλ' εἶδος).³⁵ Sommerstein and Hunter both follow Handley in accepting that as the structural division, even though only the Venetus has a *XOPOY* at this point whereas the Byzantine manuscripts have a *XOPOY* at 265 instead, where the chorus enter. The critics are surely right and we should recognize that in rejecting the Byzantine reading we are rejecting as well the old-style division by parodos.

For the other interludes in the *Plutus* we should probably again accept the Venetus, the most complete of the older manuscripts, which records three other interludes, 627, 770, 802, and again reject the testimony of the Byzantine manuscripts, which mark two additional interludes.³⁶ So Handley (60) summarizes his study of the manuscript tradition: 'there is good evidence for *XOPOY* in the *Plutus* at 321–2, 626–7, 770–1 (*KOMMATION XOPOY*), and 801–2,' He goes on to give some credence to the Byzantine manuscripts, which add further interludes at 958 and 1096, although 'the evidence is less satisfactory'. Hunter accepts neither of these; Sommerstein only the latter.

By accepting the best-attested and oldest manuscript tradition for the new form of choral act-division we find in *Ecclesiazusae* and *Plutus*, we can analyse both plays as five-act plays. At the same we must realize that we are left with no general rules

³³ For 876 Hunter (28) argues that the interlude is guaranteed by the dinner 'imagined to take place between 876 and 877', which is accepted by Sommerstein. R. G. Ussher, on the other hand, in his commentary on *Ecclesiazusae* (Oxford, 1973), xxviii, argued that 'no lapse of time... is necessary in either place where manuscripts have χοροῦ'.

³⁴ So Ussher, p. 114: 'This is technically the *παρόδος*... But in this play a formal *παρόδος* is dispensed with, and the following choric passages are sung as the women *leave*, not *enter*, the orchestra'.

³⁵ 'Another kind of entertainment' (Sommerstein 141); 'another style of performance' (Handley 59).

³⁶ The interlude at 770 was expiscated from the Venetus scholia by Handley, who also explained why V is to be preferred to R, which marks only 770 and 801 (in a later hand).

explaining why the chorus in these plays performs when it does. As we saw earlier, sometimes the interlude covers a lapse of time or offstage action (*Ecc.* 876; *Pl.* 626, 801) but as often it does not (*Ecc.* 729; *Pl.* 321, 770). This should not surprise us since we find the same inconsistency in Menander, where interludes often cover offstage action and lapse of time but sometimes do not.³⁷ If we had more complete New Comedies, we could perhaps formulate some general rules, but, given the present state of our evidence, the best we can do is something like the specific rule Hunter devised to argue for an interlude at *Ecc.* 729: 'exit and re-entry of the same character or characters to an otherwise empty stage are separated by act-break'. This pattern is found in our earliest comedy, *Acharnians*, but only becomes common in Menander, where it explains almost half the interludes.³⁸

Turning from the number of acts to their length we find that the fourth-century plays are just as uneven as the fifth-century plays:

Ecc. 1–284 311–477 504–729 730–876 877–1183

Pl. 1–252 321–626 627–770 771–801 802–1209.

Ecc. II and *Pl.* IV are shorter than their fifth-century equivalents and *Ecc.* V is longer, but the only real fifth-century pattern, the length of the first act, is still observed. In terms of absolute position (hard to measure given absence of lyrics) both fourth-century plays are shorter than the others and (naturally) begin their acts sooner, but this may simply reflect not taking account of the interludes.

Thus, by using the choral criteria of entry of chorus (parodos), choral strophic song (stasimon), parabasis and, in the fourth century, the manuscript designation of a choral interlude as the means for articulating the major structural units ('acts') of comedy, we arrive at a division of most Aristophanic plays into five acts. The question with which Sommerstein began – where Menander's five-act structure came from – may seem to be answered. But we need to consider another contender, Euripides, since for at least a century the dominant influence on New Comedy has been said to be Euripides, not Old Comedy.³⁹

Here are the Euripidean acts using the criteria of parodos and stasimon:⁴⁰

³⁷ See above n. 6. Conversely, among the many times when the stage is empty within an act in New Comedy, a few may involve offstage action or passing time (*Samia* 55, *Dyskolos* 392, 521, 666). *Samia* 55 and *Dyskolos* 510 are both 'covered' by an intervening scene, but, since at *Samia* 120 we have a similar 'covering' scene just before a choral interlude, we cannot count both of them as making up for offstage action or passing time.

³⁸ *Dyskolos* 232, 783, *Samia* 200, 420, *Epileptontes* 418 and *Perikeiromene* 266. We also find re-entry after a 'covering scene' (*Epi.* 171, *Dys.* 619, *Sa.* 120, *Asp.* 390) or a short monologue (*Peri.* 1005). This leaves us with only *Sa.* 615, *Dys.* 426, *Asp.* 249 unaccounted for, but the validity of such extensions of Hunter's rule is undercut by the fact that the pattern of a short monologue separating exit and re-entry is very common within acts.

³⁹ This is less often claimed for structure than for language, dramaturgy, theme and character, but even so there were early in the century a number of critics either affirming or denying that Euripides in particular or tragedy in general was the source of the five-act rule. So Weissinger p. 45, citing Norwood, says 'episodes in comedy are not at all like those in tragedy', while P. W. Harsh, *A Handbook of Classical Drama* (Stanford, 1944), p. 163 argues that Euripides' 'melodramatic plays... tend to have four responsive choral songs dividing the play into five sections and thus anticipating the later practice of having five acts' (see also pp. 316 and 443 n. 26). R. C. Flickinger, *The Greek Theater and its Drama* (Chicago, 1926³), p. 193 is more cautious, 'since the histrionic divisions in tragedy were more usually five and since comedy fell more and more under the domination of tragedy, the rigid principle was at last set up for both tragedy and comedy that each play should contain five acts, no more, no less'.

⁴⁰ This analysis differs from the now standard treatment of K. Aichele, 'Das Epeisodion', in *Die Bauformen der griechischen Tragödie* (ed. W. Jens, Munich, 1971), pp. 50–1 in the following ways: (a) epiprologue and epiparodoi at *Al.* 746, *Hel.* 385 and division at *Or.* 959 are not counted by Aichele; (b) Aichele adds act-divisions at *Hi.* 1267, *Hec.* 1022, *HF* 873, 1015, *Ion* 1228, *Or.*

Table 3. *Length of Acts*

	Act	Range	Mean	Mean Deviation
	first	41–201	125	37.9 (30.3%)
	second	77–377	218	70.0 (32.1%)
	third	85–633	215	65.6 (30.5%)
	fourth	33–579	192	94.1 (49.0%)
	fifth	65–614	285	152.2 (53.4%)

<i>Al</i> :	1–76	136–212	238–434	476–567	606–746	747–860	935?–961	1006–1163
<i>Med</i> :	1–130	214?–409	446–626	663–823		866–975	1002–1250	1293–1419
<i>Held</i> :	1–72	111–352	381–607	630–747		784–891	928–1055	
<i>Hi</i> :	1–120	170–524	565–731	776–1101		1151–1466		
<i>And</i> :	1–116	147–273	309–463	494–765		802–1008	1047–1288	
<i>Hec</i> :	1–97	154–443	484–628	658–904		953–1295		
<i>Su</i> :	1–41	87–364	381–597	634–777		794–954	980–1234	
<i>El</i> :	1–166	213?–431	487–698	747–858 ⁴¹		880–1146	1165–1359	
<i>HF</i> :	1–106	138–347	442–636	701–733		815–1428		
<i>Tro</i> :	1–152	230–510	568–798	860–1059		1118–1332		
<i>IT</i> :	1–125	236?–391	456–1088	1152–1233		1284–1499		
<i>Ion</i> :	1–183	237?–451	510–675	725–1047		1106–1622		
<i>Hel</i> :	1–178	253–385	386–514	528–1106		1165–1300	1369–1450	1512–1692
<i>Pho</i> :	1–201	261–637	690–783	834–1018		1067–1282	1308–1766	
<i>Or</i> :	1–139	208–315	348–806	844–959 ⁴²		1013–1692		
<i>Ba</i> :	1–63	170–369	434–518	576–861		912–976	1024–1392	
<i>IA</i> :	1–163	303–542	590–750	801–1035		1098–1629		

The pattern here is less persuasive than in Old Comedy. 8 plays have five acts, 6 have six, 2 have seven and 1 has eight. Thus only half Euripides' plays fit the five-act scheme, whereas three-quarters of Aristophanes' comedies do. Still, in Euripides there is a development over time towards the five-act form: 3 of Euripides' 9 (33%) early plays have five acts, but 5 of the 8 (62%) late ones do.⁴³

If we turn to length of acts, we find more variation than in comedy and no particular fixity to the first act (Table 3).⁴⁴

A final difference worth note regards entry and exit. While the parodos in both 1352, 1536, *Ba*. 1152, *IA* 1509; (c) Aichele counts choral anapaestic announcement as part of choral song rather than part of the following act. For a telling challenge to Aichele's 'uncritical acceptance' of Aristotelian terminology, see Taplin 470ff.

⁴¹ M. J. Cropp, *Euripides Electra* (Warminster, 1988), p. 157 rightly points to *Philoctetes* 827ff. as a parallel for interruption of a stasimon by an actor speaking stichic verse.

⁴² Many editors treat the whole of 960ff. as *Electra*'s monody, but C. W. Willink, *Euripides Orestes* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 240–1 is entirely persuasive in arguing for it as a choral stasimon plus monody: 'an act-dividing *Lament for the Extinction of the Royal House of the Atreidae*, comprising a traditionally patterned strophe and antistrophe and a long solo epode.'

⁴³ In Sophocles too the number of acts decreases steadily, with the exception of the *OC*, though there is only one five-act play:

<i>Ajax</i>	1–133	201–595	646–92	719–814	815–65	974–1184	1223–1420
<i>Ant</i> .	1–99	155–331	376–581	626–780	802–943	988–1114	1155–1353
<i>Trach.</i>	1–93	141–496	531–632	663–820	862–946	971–1278	
<i>OT</i>	1–150	216–462	512–862	911–1085	1110–1185	1223–1530	
<i>El</i> .	1–120	251–471	516–1057	1098–1383	1398–1510		
<i>Phil</i> .	1–134	219–675	730–826	865–1471			
<i>OC</i>	1–116	254–667	720–1043	1096–1210	1249–1555	1579–1779	

Note that the end of the first act is more consistent in Sophocles, ranging from 93 to 150 with a mean of 120 and a mean deviation of 17.0 (14.2%).

⁴⁴ As in comedy, in tragedy there is sometimes difficulty in delimiting the parodos; here it has been carried to the end of the lyrics, i.e. *Al*. 935 (epiparodos), *Med*. 214, *El*. 213, *IT* 236, *Ion* 237.

comedy and tragedy is often not preceded by an exit and followed by an entry, this seems never to be true of an act-dividing stasimon in Aristophanes. In Euripides, on the other hand, fully a quarter of the act-dividing stasima are either preceded by no exit or followed by no entry: *Med.* 409, *Hcl.* 607,⁴⁵ 891?,⁴⁶ *Hi.* 565, 776?,⁴⁷ *And.* 273, *Hec.* 443, *El.* 747,⁴⁸ 858?, 880?,⁴⁹ *HF.* 347, *Tro.* 510, 798,⁵⁰ *IT.* 391, 1088, *Hel.* 1106, *Pho.* 690, *Or.* 959. So, we have somewhere between fifteen and eighteen exceptions to the exit/entry pattern we find in Aristophanes.⁵¹ Like act-divisions, this difference seems to argue for a simple lineation from Old to New Comedy in terms of structure since in Menander 'every act-break requires an empty stage' (Sommerstein 139), which necessarily entails an exit before and an entry following an interlude.

Parodos and stasimon, and in comedy parabasis, are the only easily recognizable, unambiguous and distinctive choral elements in fifth-century Greek drama. It is not surprising, then, that they produce the most persuasive means of defining 'acts'. We should not return to the *Poetics*, with its confusing and conflicting terminology, or to the arbitrary and abstract patterns it has engendered. But we can speak with some assurance of a common set of criteria for formal articulation of both comedy and tragedy, confirmed not only by the relative regularity in number of acts, length of acts and position of acts regardless of author or of genre, but also by the replacement of such a scheme in New Comedy by interludes with the same formal result – five-act plays.⁵²

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⁴⁵ Makaria exits at 601, giving Iolaus a seven-line monologue before the act ends.

⁴⁶ It is doubtful whether the unmarked exit of a servant/messenger should be counted. Likewise *El.* 858.

⁴⁷ The nurse cries from within, somewhat like the children in *Med.* 1270ff. (in the middle of a stasimon!).

⁴⁸ Electra is called out only after the chorus has heard a sound and reacted (747–50).

⁴⁹ It is not clear whether Orestes enters during the stasimon or only after.

⁵⁰ It is difficult to tell at what point Hecuba is left alone; certainly by 796.

⁵¹ Taplin, thus, is wrong (e.g. 54) to try and elevate exit/entry to a major structural role in tragedy.

⁵² I am grateful to Gregory W. Dickerson, S. Douglas Olson and the journal's referee for their helpful suggestions.