

Hephaestus the Hobbling Humorist: The Club-Footed God in the History of Early Greek Comedy

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This article argues that Hephaestus, the only physically disabled Olympian deity, occupies an important position in the history of comedy and the Greek tradition of laughter. From the Homeric epics to fourth-century comedy and vase-painting, Hephaestus is consistently to be found in cultural contexts which explore the instrumentality of laughter in domestic and social relationships, rituals and entertainments. The article proposes that the structure of the mythical narrative of the Return of Hephaestus, with its estrangement of the protagonist from his community, riotous reconciliation, and *komastic* procession, underlies several Old Comedies. It also suggests that his banausic profession and deformity helped to make him particularly popular in cultural artefacts—vases and dramas—produced in Athens in the democratic period because neither his trade nor his appearance would have disqualified him from wielding sovereign power, κρᾶτος, as a citizen there.

This article argues that scholars writing the history of comedy in ancient Greece need to reappraise the pervasive presence and interventions of Hephaestus, the only physically disabled Olympian deity.¹ From the Homeric epics to fourth-century comedy and vase-painting, Hephaestus is consistently to be found in cultural contexts which explore the instrumentality of laughter in domestic and social relationships, rituals and entertainments. The nature of his functions is diverse, ranging from being (1) the butt of laughter as a lame and banausic god (κωμωδούμενος), to (2) as god of technological prowess, authoring and stage managing his own comic spectacles (κωμωδοποιός or κωμωδός), to (3) becoming Dionysus's closest Olympian drinking companion in the divine κῶμος which on numerous Attic vases provides in his intoxicated return to Olympus in company with satyrs and maenads (κωμαστής)—an aetiology, closely allied to both comic and satyric drama, for the Athenian symposium, and (4) appearing as a laughter-inducing character in several comic dramas, and thus imperson-

1. I have used the following editions and translations: for Aristophanes, Henderson (1995), (2000), (2002); for Homer, Murray (1995), (1999); for Demetrius of Phalerum, *On Style*, Innes (1995).

ated by a comic actor (ὕποκριτῆς κωμῳδός), as well as in satyr drama, where the actor would have specialised in tragedy.

The importance of limping Hephaestus to the Greek tradition of laughter has been obscured by the loss of almost all of the relevant Hephaestean texts from the archaic and classical periods. The article proposes that the structure of the mythical narrative of the Return of Hephaestus, with its estrangement of the protagonist from his community, riotous reconciliation, and komastic procession, underlies several Old Comedies. A particularly clear example is Aristophanes's *Peace*, produced in 421, the year when we know something happened to do with Hephaestus's festival in Attica. I also suggest that his banausic profession and deformity helped to make him particularly popular in cultural artefacts—vases and dramas—produced in Athens in the democratic period because neither his trade nor his appearance would have disqualified him from wielding sovereign power, κράτος, as a citizen there.

Craftsmen seem to have increased in importance at Athens during the Periclean building project, yet they still seem to have remained to an extent a socially marginalised profession, giving them an ambiguous status not unlike that of Hephaestus in relation to the other, physically perfect and leisure-class Olympians.² Athenian real-world interests in Lemnos,³ his childhood residence and favorite haunt (*Od.* 8.283–4), and home to one of his very few other major local cults, will also have been instrumental in fostering Athenian interest in him and probably in his connections with healing there. It is no coincidence that the famous statue of Hephaestus in the Erechtheion on the Athenian Acropolis was by Pheidias's younger contemporary Alcamenes, one side of whose family were Lemnian. This dignified Hephaestus representation was much praised, and only lightly hinted at the limp: Cicero describes it in *De Natura Deorum* as “a standing figure, draped, which displays a slight lameness, though not enough to be unsightly (*in quo stante atque uestito leuiter apparet claudicatio non deformis*, 1.83).”

My argument assumes that Hephaestus's lameness, despite varying in cause, precise nature, and extent depending on the source, was originally *inherent* in his mythic personality. The genesis of ancient Greek comic art cannot be fully appreciated until lame Hephaestus, Hephaestus κυλλοποδίων, is restored to his position as a major (if not the *primary*) comedic partner of the theatre-god Dionysus. His unique defect as an Olympian god is not to be dissociated from his unusual lack of success both sexually with females and biologically

2. Garland (1995) 113–14, 61–63, 34; Xen. *Oec.* 4.2–3; Arist. *Pol.* 128 1 b. 1–3.

3. See Hdt. 6.140.1; Comfort (1959) 248; Salomon (1997).

as a reproductive male. But even more significant seems to be the connection of his lameness with his identity as a god who is in class terms distinctively banausic. The class connotations of congenital lameness, at least, are expressed in Xenophon's *Hellenica* 3.3.3 by Lysander. He is defending a charge made against Agesilaus (who was lame) that an oracle of Apollo had advised the Lacedaemonians to beware of the lame kingship. Lysander replied, "on behalf of Agesilaus, that he did not suppose the god was bidding them beware in case a king of theirs should get a sprain and become lame, but rather in case a man who was not of the royal stock should become king. For the kingship would truly be lame if it were not the descendants of Heracles who were at the head of the state."

Hephaestus *kōmōidoumenos*

What was physically wrong with Hephaestus? In archaic art, he is often portrayed with floppy lower legs, and feet and ankles incorrectly aligned with his shins and calves, riding a mule, ass, or donkey, for example on the colorful Caeretan hydria of about 525 B.C.E., now in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum (3577).⁴ One epithet used for him in Homer is ἀμφιγυῖεις (e.g., *Il.* 1.607 and *Od.* 8.300). But scholars are undecided as to its meaning. It is sometimes translated "ambidexterous," implying that he was unusually strong and capable in both arms. But sometimes it was explained in antiquity as meaning "lame in both legs."⁵ Neither explanation is helpful in terms of his precise condition. A more informative epithet is κυλλοποδίων, or "with bent feet," since the stem κυλλ-precisely corresponds with the technical terms used to describe club feet in the Hippocratic *De Articulis*, usually assumed to be a late 5th- or early 4th-century work. Club foot, technically labelled Congenital Talipes Equinovarus (CTEV), is a musculoskeletal birth defect which occurs once in about a thousand live births. It makes the ankle look as though it has been bent, usually inwards, and makes the sufferer appear to walk on their ankles or sides of their feet. It is not usually related to any other defect. It occurs at double the rate in males as in females. In half of all cases it is bilateral and affects both feet. There is believed to be an inheritable predisposition to club foot, although this is still the subject of intensive chromosomal research.⁶

4. Antikensammlung, IV 3577, (<https://www.khm.at/en/objectdb/detail/56546/?offset=129&lv=list>). Brennan (2016) offers the fullest discussion of the visual representations of Hephaestus's lameness, but is unaware of or dismisses the ancient literary evidence that he was often held to have been club-footed.

5. See Deroy (1956).

6. See Bazopoulou-Kyrkanidou (1997).

There are two passages in the Hippocratic *De Articulis* which discuss club foot. In the first, it is treated as a sub-species of lameness, a category signified by the stem *χωλ-*. The adjective *χωλός* also occurs in Homer, being used of Thersites, who was “lame in one leg” (*Il.* 2.217), and who is the butt of the laughter of the Achaean soldiers, as well as of the personified Prayers or *Litai* (*Il.* 9.503) and of Hephaestus himself (*Od.* 8.300). In the first passage, the Hippocratic writer has heard the story that the Amazons deliberately dislocate their sons’ knees or hips when they are infants in order to make them lame (ὡς δῆθεν χωλὰ γίνονται) and thus prevent any male conspiracy against their matriarchy: “they used them as artisans to perform any sedentary work, such as that of a shoemaker or smith (*χαλκείης*)” (*Art.* 53). The author then uses the verb *κυλλοῦσθαι* to explain the consequences of such dislocations: “The legs (*γούνατα*) are more bandied (*κυλλοῦται*) when the dislocation is outward, but it is nevertheless easier for the possessor of an outward-turning club foot to stand on his feet than if the legs are turned inwards.”

But the person with congenital club foot (the *κυλλός*), in whom the ankle is naturally present and the leg bones are not atrophied, is likely to be able to walk; the club-footed person is thus distinguished from someone who becomes acutely lame through injury. Later in the treatise, the author insists that “most cases of congenital club-foot (*ὀκόσοι ἐκ γενεῆς κυλλοὶ γίνονται*) are remediable, unless the declination is very great, or when the condition occurs at an advanced period of youth. The best plan, then, is to treat such cases at as early a period as possible, before the deficiency of the bones of the foot is very great, and before there is any great wasting of the flesh of the leg” (*Art.* 62).

The treatise distinguishes more than one variety of club-foot (*κυλλώσιος*). Most of them are not complete dislocations, but impairments connected with the habitual maintenance of the limb in a certain position. Treatment consists of putting pressure on the bones of the leg and feet so they begin to grow or move into correct alignment, as a wax-worker moulds an object (*ὥσπερ κηροπλαστέοντα*). Pressure is applied by plaster made from wax and resin, compresses, bandages and soles of soft leather or lead, which are stitched in place, and then an outer shoe or boot of lead: “The most suitable are those calf-length boots (*ἀρβύλαι*) which are called *πηλοπάτιδες* because they are used for travel on muddy ground; for this kind of shoe does not yield to the foot, but the foot yields to it, *Art.* 62.” So Hephaestus’s condition could have been treated by manipulation, orthotic bandaging, and stiff, structured footwear functioning as a splint.

One scene in Aristophanes makes fun of a man who may have been visually represented as club-footed, Cinesias, the dithyrambic poet in Aristophanes’s *Birds*. Cinesias enters and sings: “On my light pinions I soar off to Olympus; in its capricious flight my Muse flutters along the thousand paths of poetry in

turn, *Av.* 1373–74”); most of his words consist of further ethereal poetry of this nature. But Peisetairos suggests that it would be difficult to get Cinesias off the ground at all: “This is a fellow who will need a whole shipload of wings,” *Av.* 1375). In his next retort, he addresses Cinesias as the “lime-wood man” (*Av.* 1378) and says that he is doing something circular with his club foot:

ἀσπαζόμεσθα φιλόρινον Κινησίαν.
τί δεῦρο πόδα σὺ κυλλὸν ἀνὰ κύκλον κυκλεῖς; (*Ar. Av.* 1378–79)

Our greetings to twiggly Cinesias! Why do you whirl your bandy foot hither in a pirouette?

He is chased from the stage. But the adjective φιλόρινος is suggestive, given that Galen says that lime wood was used for medical splints (*Comm. On Hipp. Fractures* 18B.505k, ἐκ φιλόρου). I wonder whether *kullos*-legged Cinesias does not wear heavy splints, with which he draws dithyrambic circles in the soil of Cloudcuckooland.

With some sense of how Hephaestus the club-footed Olympian was physically imagined, we can turn to the earliest mention of Hephaestus as an object of comedy in the surviving literary tradition, the Olympian council which closes the first book of the *Iliad*. Hephaestus is not here explicitly said to be lame, but he reminds his mother Hera that resistance against Zeus is hopeless; once before he had tried to support her against Zeus, but Zeus had picked him up by the leg and hurled him down to Lemnos in retaliation. Now he serves the Olympians with their nectar:

αὐτὰρ ὁ τοῖς ἄλλοισι θεοῖς ἐνδέξια πᾶσιν
οἰνοχόει γλυκὴ νέκταρ ἀπὸ κρητῆρος ἀφύσσω:
ἄσβεστος δ' ἄρ' ἐνῶρτο γέλως μακάρεσσι θεοῖσιν
ὡς ἴδον Ἥφαιστον διὰ δώματα ποιπνύοντα. (*Hom. Il.* 1.597–600)

Then he poured wine for all the other gods from left to right, drawing sweet nectar from the bowl. And unquenchable laughter arose among the blessed gods, as they saw Hephaestus puffing (*poiipnuonta*) through the palace.

Hephaestus is an object of laughter not here specifically because he is lame but because he is ποιπνύοντα (600). This word is used of any kind of *servile* labor or effort, like domestic cleaning; it is used of Hephaestus’s own robotic metal maidservants when they help him move round his Olympian home (*Il.* 18.421). It may well be that the reason the gods laugh is the contrast with the graceful service they are accustomed to from the beautiful Ganymede, as pointed out by a scholiast (*scholion* bT on line 584). But it is difficult to see how the audience

does not think of Hephaestus's club foot, the image of which must have been insinuated by his own reference to how Zeus had picked him up *by the leg* a few lines previously.

In a 2009 article, Rinon argues that the presentation of Hephaestus in both Homeric epics is distinctively tragic. The reasons Rinon gives are that he is portrayed in both epics “as a god endowed with unusually human characteristics”:

Afflicted in body and limited in movement, suffering pain and humiliation, bound by human institutions such as marriage and divorce, and laughing stock of the other gods, he is unique among the Olympians in his humanized characterization. His unique status is used for dramatic effect, for this humanized god serves as a figure whose tragic depth is otherwise unavailable to immortals, one of whose main characteristics is a ‘lofty levity’ that often enables them to deride and mock the agonies of mortals. In the *Iliad*, Hephaestus's tragic awareness finds its most brilliant expression in his creation of the shield of Achilles, where his engravings reveal his humane perspective on the human lot. In the *Odyssey*, his betrayal serves as an emblem of the miseries of mortals and as a reminder of the ineradicable chasm between humans and gods. Despite differences between the epics, the portrayal of this exceptional god serves the poet in both cases as a means to represent a tragic perception of the human condition which is marked by pain and suffering (Rinon [2009] 18–19).

I fear that this is to impose a 21st-century liberal, humanist view of deformity and ugliness on these texts, where pathos and (what seems to us cruel) laughter at the expense of disability can surely exist side by side. Rinon's reading does not take into account the subsequent close relationship between Hephaestus and the comic in both art and literature.

In *Iliad* book 18 we finally learn that Hephaestus was *born* lame and was therefore disabled long before Zeus's punitive assault. When Thetis arrives at Hephaestus's house she is received by his wife, Charis. From his workshop he calls out to them that Thetis saved him when he fell from Olympus because his mother wanted to hide him on account of his lameness (ἦ μ' ἐθέλησε / κρύψαι χωλὸν ἔόντα *Il.* 18. 392–93). Thetis and the Oceanid Eurynome had looked after him in their cave for nine years, and he had forged pieces of jewellery there (18. 394). We then receive the fullest description of his appearance and gait, which twice uses the verb χωλεῦν:

ἦ, καὶ ἀπ' ἀκμοθέτοιο πέλωρ αἶητον ἀνέστη
 χωλεῦων· ὑπὸ δὲ κνήμαι ῥώνοντο ἀραιαί.
 φύσας μὲν ῥ' ἀπάνευθε τίθει πυρός, ὄπλά τε πάντα
 λάρνακ' ἐξ ἀργυρέην συλλέξατο, τοῖς ἐπονεῖτο:

σπόγγῳ δ' ἀμφὶ πρόσωπα καὶ ἄμφω χεῖρ' ἀπομόργνυ
 αὐχένα τε στιβαρὸν καὶ στήθεα λαχνήεντα,
 δὴ δὲ χιτῶν', ἔλε δὲ σκηπτρον παχύ, βῆ δὲ θύραζε
 χολεύων· ὑπὸ δ' ἀμφίπολοι ῥώνοντο ἄνακτι
 χρύσειαι ζῳῆσι νεήγισιν εἰοικυῖαι.
 τῆς ἐν μὲν νόος ἐστὶ μετὰ φρεσίν, ἐν δὲ καὶ αὐδὴ
 καὶ σθένος, ἀθανάτων δὲ θεῶν ἅπο ἔργα ἴσασιν.
 αἱ μὲν ὑπαιθα ἄνακτος ἐποίπνυον· (Hom. *Il.* 18.410–21)

He spoke and rose from the anvil, a huge, panting bulk, limping along, but beneath
 him his slender legs moved nimbly. The bellows he set away from the fire, and
 gathered all the tools with which he worked into a silver chest; and with a
 sponge he
 wiped his face and both his hands, and his mighty neck and shaggy breast, and
 put on
 a tunic, and grasped a stout staff, and went out limping; and there moved
 swiftly to
 support their lord handmaids made of gold in the semblance of living girls. In
 them is
 understanding in their minds, and in them speech and strength, and they know
 cunning handiwork by gift of the immortal gods.

This scene does not mention any laughter in response to Hephaestus's appearance, although it does mention his mother's desire to conceal him because of his lameness. Perhaps the ancient audiences found the image of his sweat, his powerful upper body on his spindly legs, and his robot assistants, much more amusing than have people in more recent times.⁷ But this, the most detailed word-picture of Hephaestus available to ancient Greeks, certainly emphasised his lameness, which we would do well to keep it in mind when approaching our other evidence.

Hephaestus *kōmōidopoiōs*

Laughter is certainly at the centre of the most important Hephaestus episode in the *Odyssey*, where the smith-god dialectically metamorphoses from object of ridicule to mastermind of a comic spectacle. Demodocus sings the “Lay of Ares and Aphrodite,” about the adulterous affair of the gods of war and erotic

7. See the dignity and pathos of Henry Fuseli's 1805 painting of crippled Hephaestus in Schiff (1975) 349, no. 1191, entreated by Thetis and supported by his handmaiden automata. It was inspired by Alexander Pope's translation of the *Iliad* 18.

love. Ares has “shamed the bed of the lord Hephaestus” (λέχος δ’ ἤσχυνε και εὐνήν / Ἥφαιστοιο ἄνακτος, 8.269–70). Helios informs Hephaestus, who goes to his smithy, “pondering evil deep in his heart” (κακὰ φρεσὶ βυσσοδομεύων, 8.273). He makes a trap of bonds to bind his wife and her lover, hangs the trap from his bed-posts and the roof above them, and pretends to leave for Lemnos. Ares and Aphrodite seize their apparent opportunities but are soon held fast in Hephaestus’s snare. He returns, again tipped off by Helios. Now, in fierce anger and a terrible voice (χόλος δέ μιν ἄγριος ἦρει / σμερδαλέον δ’ ἐβόησε, 8.304–5), he calls on Zeus and the other gods to witness what has happened:

“Ζεῦ πάτερ ἦδ’ ἄλλοι μάκαρες θεοὶ αἰὲν ἐόντες,
 δεῦθ’ ἵνα ἔργα γελαστά και οὐκ ἐπιεικτὰ ἴδησθε,
 ὡς ἐμὲ χολὸν ἐόντα Διὸς θυγάτηρ Ἀφροδίτη
 αἰὲν ἀτιμάζει, φιλέει δ’ αἰδηλὸν Ἄρηα,
 οὐνεχ’ ὁ μὲν καλὸς τε και ἀρτίπος, αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ γε
 ἠπεδανὸς γενόμεν. ἀτὰρ οὐ τί μοι αἴτιος ἄλλος,
 ἀλλὰ τοκῆε δῶ, τῷ μὴ γείνασθαι ὄφελλον. (Hom. *Od.* 8.306–12)

“Father Zeus, and you other blessed gods who are forever, come here to see something laughable and intolerable. Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus, scorns me because I am lame and loves destructive Ares because he is beautiful and strong-limbed, whereas I was born feeble. Yet nobody is to blame for this except my two parents. I wish they had never conceived me!”

He says that he expects the return of all the gifts he gave to Aphrodite’s father when he wooed her. The male gods come to his house—Poseidon and Hermes and Apollo. The goddesses do not come out of shame, but the other gods stand in his gateway, and unquenchable laughter arose among them (ἄσβεστος δ’ ἄρ’ ἐνῶρτο γέλως, 8.326) when they saw the crafty trick of Hephaestus.⁸ They agree that Ares owes a penalty. Hermes, however, sees a humorous side, and wisecracks that he would himself be willing to be seen by all the goddesses as well, in three time as many bonds, if only he could get to sleep with Aphrodite.

This joke induces more laughter ὡς ἔφατ’, ἐν δὲ γέλως ὄρτ’ ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσιν, 8.343). But Poseidon does not laugh; instead he pleads with Hephaestus to release Ares, who, he says, will pay the right recompense in front of the gods;

8. At *Il.* 17.88–89 it is not laughter created by Hephaestus that is called “inextinguishable” but the very flame he uses to create his artefacts (Hector, screaming angrily in his gleaming bronze helmet “is like the inextinguishable flame of Hephaestus” (φλογὶ εἵκελος Ἥφαιστοιο / ἀσβέστω). The metaphorical transference of the epithet from fire to laughter in Hephaestean contexts such as the “Lay of Demodocus” may suggest some ritual involving both about which are sadly not informed.

if Ares does not, then he, Poseidon, will personally see to it that Hephaestus receives his due compensation. Hephaestus now agrees and releases the two lovers, who depart to Thrace and Paphos, respectively.

Hephaestus, by coming out better in the incident through deploying cunning and skill rather than physical strength and beauty, provides (as so often in the poem) a parallel with its hero Odysseus, with whom he shares the epithet *πολύμητις* (“extremely cunning”).⁹ But what is most striking from this article’s perspective is that Hephaestus stages a comic spectacle; he is the *κωμωδός* of the *Odyssey*. His stratagem turns Aphrodite and Ares into *κωμωδούμενοι*, and the male gods duly laugh that unquenchable laughter in response to the show he has put on. But this is not just gentle humor: Hephaestus is dishonored, angry, and *using* laughter in order to gain respect, public recognition that he has been grievously wronged, and acknowledgment that he is entitled to compensation. There is a dangerous moment when Hermes’s joke about the impossibility of putting a price on having sex with Aphrodite threatens to turn the comic tables back against Hephaestus, as Odysseus manages to turn the laughter against lame Thersites in *Iliad* 2. But Poseidon, at least, is aware that the incident is a major threat to the stability of Olympian society and does *not* laugh at Hermes’s joke, instead making sure that Hephaestus will be compensated.¹⁰

Yet, either way, Hephaestus is doing exactly what early comedy seems to have been invented to do: provide a vehicle for humorous invective against individuals whose behavior was open to criticism as harming other individuals in the community and thus the common interest. Hephaestus can never win in a competition based on beauty or physique, nor (like Odysseus) on fleetness of foot (*Il.* 8.740–80). But he can use his technological skill plus humor to protect his status in the community and counter-attack when he is insulted. As Christopher Brown argues, Hephaestus here uses *aischrologia* laughter as instrument of social justice.¹¹

If we had more than mere fragments of those precious archaic texts which told of his other famous technological ruse—designing a chair in which to imprison his mother Hera—we would know much more about how Hephaestus could orchestrate comic spectacle in order to wreak revenge against one who had abused and insulted him, and to effect his own reinstatement as a god who deserved the respect of the Olympians, however ugly, disabled, and banalistic he may have been. These lost texts are the Homeric *Hymn* to Dionysus quoted

9. See Scally (1978) and Newton (1987).

10. See further Brown (1989) 285–88.

11. Brown (1989) 292.

by Diodorus 3.66.3,¹² a hymn by Alcaeus, and a poem by Pindar.¹³ That “Hera Bound by her Son” (Ἡρας δὲ δεσμούςς ὑπὸ ὑέος) constituted a popular and well-known myth is clear from Plato’s *Republic* (2.378d), where it earns special disapprobation, along with the other Hephaestus story in which it is Zeus who hurls him from Olympus. These, says Socrates, are the sort of stories that must not be told to children because they provide examples of conflict between the Olympians.

The basic outlines of the story, depicted on fourth-century vases and retold in several later sources, as summarized by Martin West, are these:¹⁴ from Lemnos, where Hera had hurled him in disgust, Hephaestus “sent his mother a fine throne, in which he had incorporated a secret mechanism. When she sat down in it, she found herself trapped. None of the other gods was able to free her. It was clear that Hephaestus had to be induced to come back and undo what he had done. Ares undertook to go and fetch him by force. He went off, but failed to achieve his object, because Hephaestus defended himself with fire, which Ares could not face. Then Dionysus went equipped with wine, made Hephaestus drunk, and brought him back to Olympus in jolly mood, riding on a donkey or mule. He set Hera free, and she rewarded Dionysus by persuading the other Olympians to admit him to their number.” Hephaestus made a laughing stock of Hera, and possibly of Ares, before joining Dionysos in the aboriginal divine κῶμος, the first comic revel on Olympus, as the archetypal κωμαστής.

This aetiology, which roots the Dionysiac revel in Hephaestus’s successful use of laughter in assertion of his status and rights as a member of his community, seems appropriate for a genre of drama which was so intimately bound up with the emergence of democracies, not only at Athens, but in Sicily and at Megara, where the local people said that they had introduced comedy at the time they established their democracy (Arist. *Poet.* 1448a). It chimes particularly well in tune with the account of the origin of comedies recorded in a number of later sources:¹⁵ farmers who had suffered harm at the hands of some Athenians went about the streets by night near the houses of their persecutors, shouting aloud their sufferings. These farmers were later made to do this again in the theatre, where they needed to preserve their anonymity through fear of reprisals. They

12. West (2001).

13. Alc. fr. 349a-e Voigt; see Libermann (1999) ii. 152–3; Pind. fr. 283 Snell-Maehler.

14. *LIMC* IV.1 694 s.v. “Hera” no. 317, and 639 s.v. “Hephaestus” no. 126; *Hyg. Fab.* 166; Paus. 1.20.3; *Lib. Narr.* 30. 1; cf. Aristid. *Or.* 41.6, West (2001) 3. See also Brommer (1937).

15. Conveniently edited by Koster (1975) as *Proleg.* 4.1–11, 16.1.14 ff., 18a.1–19, 21a.25–56, 33.2.1–12.

did so by covering themselves with wine-lees. In this way comedy began. The aim of this public declaration of wrongs in the theatre was to stop the guilty Athenians from further wrongdoing by publicly shaming them. The sources imply that these farmers were successful.

Hephaestus *kōmastēs*

The literary evidence prompts further questions. First, had Hephaestus always been associated with the idea of obscene comic abuse, whether the satire of the archaic iambic poets or the insults delivered by members of the *kōmos* during Dionysiac festivals? There may be a special connection between aischrologic abuse and Hephaestus's club feet, although, once again, the loss of so much archaic poetry, in this case of iambic abuse poetry supposedly invented by Hipponax, leaves us short of pieces in the jig-saw puzzle of Hephaestean humor. In a tantalising line, the Hellenistic mimiambist Herodas claims Hipponax as his own poetic ancestor and in doing so claims expertise in iambs and in the "limping" or "clubfooted" metre (8.75–79). He avers that he shares with Hipponax of old "the ability to sing limping songs," and here uses the rare *κυλλ-* stem of the choliambic metre ([τ]ὰ κύλλ' αἰεῖδεν, 8.78–79), which reminds us of the *kull*-footed god of the *Iliad*. Hipponax, like Hephaestus, also used his technical skill, even if as a poet rather than as a smith, to extract revenge for public humiliation. According to a scholion on Horace's *Epodes*, there was a tradition that Hipponax wanted to marry the daughter of Bupalus, a painter of Clazomenae. He was despised because he was deformed (*pro deformitate contemptus est*), and Bupalus made a portrait of him looking hideous (and displaying the picture at the Panathenaea! [schol. Acron., Hor., *Epod.*, 6.14 [Test. 9a D.]) in order to make the viewer laugh. Hipponax got his revenge by attacking him so cruelly in his poetry that Bupalus hanged himself.¹⁶ The *κωμωδοῦμενος*, mocked for his physical unattractiveness to a woman, turned, just like Hephaestus in the *Odyssey*, into the clever *κωμωδός*.

The notion of limping or faltering gait also has something to do with the distinctive *skazon* or *choliambic* metre (*σκάζων, χωλίαμβος*) of invective poetry, of which Hipponax was the supposed inventor. This is an iambic senarius, but with a thumping spondee or trochee replacing the final iambus. There is a suggestive description of what Hipponax achieved thereby in Demetrius:

λοιδορῆσαι γὰρ βουλόμενος τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ἔθραυσεν τὸ μέτρον, καὶ ἐποίησεν χωλὸν ἀντὶ εὐθέος καὶ ἄρρυθμον, τουτέστι δεινότητι πρέπον καὶ λοιδορία: τὸ γὰρ ἔρρυθμον καὶ εὐήκοον ἐγκωμίοις ἂν πρέπει μᾶλλον ἢ ψόγοις. τοσαῦτα καὶ περὶ συγκρούσεως. (Demetr. *Eloc.* 5.301)

16. Schol. on Hor. *Epod.* 6.14 (Acron., test. 9a D.).

Wanting to insult his enemies, he shattered his metre, he made it limp instead of walk straight, he made the rhythm irregular, and therefore suitable for forceful insult. Regular, harmonious rhythm would be more suitable for eulogy than invective. This concludes my account of hiatus.

The very form of abuse poetry was therefore felt by the ancient Greeks to be somehow *de*-formed in a way that suggested the body and more likely the distorted, uneven rhythm of the gait of a person with a limp. And the most instantly recognisable lame individual in their mythology was none other than *κυλλοποδίων* Hephaestus.

The second question related to the archaic evidence is how far Hephaestus was connected with the transformation of pre- and proto-theatrical bibulous revels of one kind and another into what we would recognise as comic drama. The evidence in the archaic literary sources for Hephaestean laughter is here complicated by the visual depiction of lame carousers on many Corinthian black-figure pots, which some scholars have even argued represent a retinue following Hephaestus, or even a guild or ritual group of dancers all representing the smith-god, plural *Hephaesti*.¹⁷ Another possibility, which I find more plausible, is that the club-footed god was drawn into a pre-existing tradition of deformed entertainers performing bizarre phallic dances at Corinthian symposia. He first certainly joins the lame revels on a Middle Corinthian pot from the first quarter of the sixth century,¹⁸ although the association might of course antedate this vase. Ziskowski describes the scene thus: “On this vase a lame-footed man rides a donkey and drinks from a rhyton. Behind the donkey follows a bearded figure holding a bunch of grapes in his hand. A figure walks behind them wrapped in a cloak covered in scales or feathers. At least two padded dancers surround these figures. Scholars have argued whether or not the cloaked figure is a representation of Dionysos . . . Dionysos is expected to be found in this image, given that this is the scene of the lame Hephaestus being led by Dionysos back to Mount Olympos, as described in Pausanias (1.20.3) and other sources.”¹⁹

The wealth of visual evidence for lame dancers on archaic Corinthian pots, alongside the paucity of archaic Greek Hephaestus texts, has laid the playing field wide open for speculation here, like almost everything else to do with entertainment in the sixth century B.C.E. What is certain is that the “Return of Hephaestus” to Olympus is an exceptionally popular topic in vase-painting elsewhere, especially in Attica, and one of the most frequent episodes designed

17. See e.g., Smith (2009).

18. Athens, National Museum of Archaeology 664.

19. Ziskowski (2012) 217.

to stimulate ‘visual humor.’²⁰ The middle frieze of side B of the body of the Attic François Vase in Florence Archaeological Museum, painted by Cleitias in about 570 B.C.E., has the most detailed Olympian scene:²¹

Zeus sits at the center of the scene on a throne covered with tapestries, its back ending in a volute. He wears a white chiton and himation. Hera sits in a second throne behind him (or to his side), her feet on a footstool. The back of her throne ends in a swan’s head. Behind Hera stands Athena, looking back towards Ares and mocking him. She wears a chiton and purple himation. Ares kneels behind her on a low block, crestfallen at his failure to bring back Hephaestus and at the upcoming marriage of his lover Aphrodite to Hephaestus; he is fully armed with a helmet on his head, a spear, a shield decorated with a demon’s head in high relief, greaves and a cuirass. Behind Ares comes Artemis, gesturing with her hand, and then two more male deities, who are poorly preserved but are probably Poseidon and Hermes. Part of Poseidon’s trident is visible and the bottom of Hermes’s kerykeion.

In the right side of the scene Hephaestus arrives at Olympus, riding on an ithyphallic mule and accompanied by silens. He is wearing a decorated chiton and himation, his arms are crossed over his chest and he carries a whip in his left hand. His crippled feet face in opposite directions, and his hips are malformed. His face was painted with purple over the black glaze. Hephaestus is led by Dionysos, whose figure is largely lost; he wears a richly decorated himation and chiton, and his arms too are crossed over his chest. The procession is greeted by Aphrodite, dressed in a richly decorated himation, who gestures in dismay at the sight of her new husband. Hephaestus is accompanied by a band of silens or satyrs and nymphs. The silens are lean and ithyphallic and have equine legs, tails, and ears. The first is bent beneath a great wineskin on his shoulder; the second plays the aulos and wears a mouth band; the third carries a nymph in his arms, and two more nymphs follow. They wear richly decorated peploi and the last one carries a pair of cymbals.

Hephaestus’s malformed hips and feet pointing in opposite directions are strikingly clear in this scene, where he is also the *komastic* victor who has humiliated highhanded divinities far sounder than him in body.²²

20. According to Mitchell (2009) 283–93. On the popularity of the episode in vase-painting of this period, see Brommer (1937), (1978); Halm-Tisserant (1986).

21. This description has been taken from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/artifact?name=Florence+4209&object=Vase>.

22. Wilamowitz believed that the scene was related to a lost hymn to Hephaestus and proposed that the archaic myth was associated with a ritual performed on Samos at the Tonaia festival (on which see Ath. 672a–d) where Hera’s wooden cult image (*bretas*) was bound with rods from the *lygos* tree: von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1895) 221–23.

In his influential study of the large body of Attic vases depicting Hephaestus's victorious, drunken return to Olympus in company with Dionysus and his retinue of satyrs and maenads, Guy Hedreen argues that the vase-paintings need to be considered as an autonomous cultural tradition which may have little connection with the lost poems and everything to do with the epiphanic processions in which Dionysus was customarily escorted into the city of Athens amidst drunken carousers, phallic display, verbal abuse and semi-ritualized obscenity.²³ Although there are so many such vases, there are hilarious and delightful variants in details of the scene. Hephaestus sometimes walks, leaning on Dionysus, but often rides the donkey, either astride or side saddle. Satyrs sometimes try to have penetrative sex with the animal,²⁴ or sprawl upon it playing a musical instrument. Wine-jugs may be suspended from the Donkey's penis, and a dwarfish accomplice, probably Kedalion, Hephaestus's mentor or accomplice, occasionally appears.²⁵

Hephaestus is Dionysus's companion because both gods were rejected and insulted but in this *komastic* procession both get the last laugh as well as triumphant recognition. Hedreen links some vase-paintings explicitly with the exceptionally drunken procession to the temple of Dionysus in the Marshes during the Choes, the second day of the Anthesteria. On this occasion there was an annual drinking competition in which the participants took their wine (most unusually) from their own individual jugs and unmixed with water. This was followed by a rowdy procession or riot when a crowd of drunken men staggered to the sanctuary in the marshes, as the chorus of frogs singing to Dionysus in Aristophanes's *Frogs*:

βρεκεκεκεξὲξ κοᾶξ κοᾶξ,
 βρεκεκεκεξὲξ κοᾶξ κοᾶξ.
 λιμναῖα κρηνῶν τέκνα,
 ζύναυλον ὕμνων βοᾶν
 φθεγξόμεθ', εὐγηρὺν ἐμὴν
 ἀοιδάν, κοᾶξ κοᾶξ,
 ἦν ἀμφὶ Νυσήϊον
 Διὸς Διόνυσον ἐν
 λίμναισιν ἰαχίσαμεν,
 ἠνίχ' ὁ κραιπαλόκωμος

23. Hedreen (2004).

24. See e.g., the black-figured amphora in the Ashmolean Museum, 1920.107.

25. On Kedalion, see scholion on *Il.* 15.296a (Erbse 4.635). I am discussing lame Hephaestus's relationship with him and a third disabled being, the blinded Orion, in a forthcoming publication arising from a conference on disability and Classics at King's College London in June 2018. On dwarves in ancient Greek culture more widely, see Dasen (2013).

τοῖς ἱεροῖσι Χύτροισι χωρεῖ
κατ' ἐμὸν τέμενος λαῶν ὄγλος.
βρεκεκεκεξ κοὰξ κοὰξ. (Ar. *Ran.* 209–20)

Brekekekex koax koax,
brekekekex koax koax!
Children of lake and stream,
let's voice a cry in concert
with the pipes, our own euphonious
song—koax koax—
that once we sounded
for the Nysean son of Zeus,
Dionysus, in the Marshes,
when the hungover throng of revellers
on holy Pot Day
reeled through my precinct.
Brekekekex koax koax!

The actual degree of drunkenness in this annual intoxication ritual,²⁶ suggested by that striking compound noun *κραιπαλόκωμος* (inebriated revel), seems to Hedreen to be portrayed also on several Attic “Return of Hephaestus” vases, especially a red-figure *χοῦς* now in New York (Fig. 1). It is, says Hedreen, the product of some thought by the artist because Dionysos and Hephaestus are uniquely shown riding the same donkey. And while Hephaestus is gesturing, Dionysus looks decidedly the worse for wear. He slumps, clutching his drinking-cup with both hands.

Hephaestus tou dramatos prosōpon

Given the connection of Hephaestus and his lameness with laughter, the extraction of social justice, extreme drinking rituals, and the Dionysiac *κῶμος*, it is little surprise that he is the most prominent Olympian other than Dionysos in the Athenian cultural imagination when satyric and comic theatre are invented. The moment of transition from revel to theatrical enactment seems crystallized in the “Return of Hephaestus” scene on a calyx-krater dating from between 470 and 460 B.C.E. by the Altamura Painter.²⁷ The drunken Hephaestus is walking with Dionysos, but they are led by a satyr, proudly strumming his kithara and clearly shown in the costume shorts of a theatrical satyr-player.

26. Bremmer (2014) 40–41 notes that unusually heavy drinking was part of the mysteries of the Kabeiroi, Hephaestus’ children, on both Lemnos and Samothrace.

27. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum 985.



Figure 1. Image reference: ART424348. Credit: Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY. Description: (attributed to). Oinochoe: chous (jug). Ca. 430–420 BCE. Greek, Attic. Classical period. Terracotta, H. 8 3/4 in. (22.2 cm), Overall, front. Rogers Fund, 1908 (08.258.22). Artist: Washing Painter (5th BCE). Location: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

A crucial element in the Athenian cult of Dionysus was the annual enactment of the Return of Hephaestus at the Anthesteria, which Hedreen has argued explains the large number of vase-paintings of this episode from the mid-sixth century onwards. His deformity becomes less apparent and is sometimes completely invisible, suggesting that his identity as triumphant co-reveller with Dionysus has become far more dominant at Athens than that of misshapen butt of laughter. The visual representations of the episode, especially those in which Hephaestus is riding a donkey, may have informed numerous scenes in the theatre, such as the opening of *Frogs* in which Dionysus walks while his slave Xanthias, encumbered with baggage, rides a donkey. We can take this further and ask whether the story of the “Return of Hephaestus” was not one *Ur*-plot of Greek satyr drama and subsequently of comedy, or at least a

central structuring narrative in the construction of those plots. The satyr drama represents a type of Dionysiac revel in which the tragic tetralogy culminates, and most Old Comedies conclude with a *kōmos* in honor of Dionysus, eternally replaying that archetypal carousal of the drinking buddies Dionysos and Hephaestus as they returned, victorious, to their Olympian home.²⁸

Achaeus, the dramatist from Eretria famous for his satyr plays, composed a *Hephaestus*. In a Sophoclean satyr play, the satyrs participated in the invention of womankind. In a fragment of his *Pandora* one individual (Hephaestus?) is instructed by another to “begin to manipulate the clay in your two hands: (*TGrF* F 482 Radt). This leaves little doubt that Pandora, the first woman, was actually constructed in the Athenian theatre, as she had been in Hesiod’s accounts (*Theog.* 578–89, *Op.* 60–82). Other evidence links the satyrs with Hephaestus in the role of his workmen, and the play had an alternative title, *Σφυροκόποι*, “Hammerers,” which indicates that in it the satyrs either helped to craft Pandora or hammered on the ground to release her from it. This interpretation is perhaps supported by a vase-painting likely to have been inspired by this play, in which scene Pandora appears to be depicted in the process of rising from the earth.²⁹

Hephaestus, of course, appeared also in tragedy, in the Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound*. Zoja Pavlovskis asks whether Hephaestus at the opening of this famous play was portrayed as lame or not. She points out that since Zeus had only recently acquired power (*PV* 35), it is possible that the play assumed that Hephaestus had not yet been hurled from Olympus, if we understand *Iliad* 1.590–94 as implying that he became deformed because of the injury received when he was hurled from Olympus by Zeus. In this case, the scene contains considerable dramatic irony because the audience will have been aware that Hephaestus, too, will soon have his mobility compromised like Prometheus. On the other hand, if Hephaestus is already lame (and curiously Pavlovskis rules out the possibility that the play could have assumed the dominant version of the story in which he was *born* lame), the reverberations are different. She considers the possibility that the effect of Hephaestus hobbling onto and off the stage would have been unsettlingly comic. If so, several of the words and phrases Hephaestus himself uses would “seem to be puns (whether conscious

28. On the connections between satyr drama and comedy, see Shaw (2014).

29. For the suggestion that the Return of Hephaestus could serve as the culmination to a number of “Release” stories, such as that of Persephone, in which the goddess must be released in order to bring the onset of spring, see Webster (1958) 43–48.

or unwitting depends on whether he is lame or not) pointing to his own disability as well as that of Prometheus³⁰: ἐμποδῶν (*PV* 13) and ὀρθοστάδην . . . οὐ κάμπτων γόνυ (*PV* 32).

But it is the structure of the plots of Old Comedy which may owe most to the fundamental myth of the return of Hephaestus. It is telling that amongst the titles of the Sicilian Epicharmus, according to Aristotle one of the inventors of comic plots (μῦθοι), (*Arist. Poet.* 5.1449b5), is a *Hephaestus* or *Komast*. The comic poet named Alcaeus, of Mytilene, wrote a mythological burlesque entitled *Ganymede*. It staged a comic version of the story of Ganymede; Zeus took Hephaestus to earth to help acquire Ganymede, rather than his usual accomplice Hermes, or sending an eagle. The fragments suggest (what now seems tasteless) slapstick humor at the expense of Hephaestus's limp: "Hurry up, lame one, or you will be blasted by a thunderbolt!"³¹ The conflict between Hephaestus and Ares and its relation to Hera also remained a theme favored by comic writers across the Greek world, at least to judge from an Apulian red-figured calyx krater of the mid-fourth century B.C.E., found at Bari and now in the British Museum.³² Actors playing the gods, labelled "Daidalos" and "Enyalios" to suggest their connections with craftwork and war respectively, fight on a wooden stage approached by a staircase, on which another actor, elaborately costumed as Hera, sits enthroned, her name clearly incised.

At Athens, Hephaestus's civic status grew in the fifth century. This is indicated by the construction of the Hephaisteion in the part of the city centre near bronze smiths' workshops.³³ And there may even have been drama or at least poetry competitions at the Athenian festival of Hephaestus: an inscription relating to the organisation of the Hephaestia festival dated to 421/0 and Xenophon's *Constitution of Athens* 3.4 between them indicate that χορηγοί were allotted at the Hephaestia and the Promethia.³⁴ In several Aristophanic comedies (*Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Peace*, *Birds*, *Lysistrata*, *Frogs*, *Assemblywomen*) the protagonist is a non-aristocratic citizen, who is or feels alienated from the civic community on account of some problem or by some outrageous behavior on the part of those in power. These heroes and heroines are insulted and become distanced from the community, but through their

30. Pavloskis (1989) 370n9.

31. Storey (2011) fr. 3: κατάχολε, θάπτον, ἢ κεραυνοπλήξ ἔση.

32. Vase BM F 269 = Reg. 1772,0320.33.

33. Fineberg (2009) 298n43. On the workshops around the temple see Travlos (1971) 261–73.

34. Moore (1971).



Figure 2. Image reference: ART390052. Credit: © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Description: Red-Figure Bell Krater. Side A: The Return of Hephaistos. Attributed to the Hector Painter. 38.8 x 43.9 cm. Inv.: G 421. Photo: Hervé Lewandowski. Location: Louvre, (Museum), Paris, France.

own cleverness and careful use of allies succeed in winning the argument, solving the communal problem, and being reintegrated into their city. This leads to a drunken revel and Dionysiac procession at the play's end. The pattern of alienation, exclusion, struggle, stratagem, reintegration, and revel is identical to the underlying structure of the story of Hephaestus's revenge related in the song of Demodocus in *Odyssey* 8 and the lost archaic texts of the "Return of Hephaestus", as well as being re-enacted annually at the Athenian Anthesteria.³⁵

Aristophanes's *Peace* of 421, around the time of those attested χορηγοί at the Hephaestus festival, perhaps reveals this underlying structure most explicitly. There is a joke about the possibility of Trygaeus becoming lame as he journeys between Earth and Olympus (147). The chorus consists of peasant farmers, and the alienated hero who eventually is reintegrated into his community is named "Trygaeus." This reminds us of the term Aristophanes used to mean "comedy,"

35. It may be useful to think of the annual procession that took place during the City Dionysia, when the god Dionysus was escorted into the city. See Seaford (2012) 77–82 on the route of the procession and on its civic and religious meaning(s).

tragedy (“wine-song”; e.g., *Ach.* 499), but also suggestive of the aetiology of comedy discussed above in which Attic farmers, their faces disguised by wine-lees (τρῦξι), recited the wrongs in the Athenian theatre in order to receive recompense for their injuries.³⁶

Recovering the role of the lame Hephaestus in the emergence of comic form and content in ancient Greek poetry, ritual, art and theatre is thus impeded by the loss of so much of the relevant literature, and yet it is by no means impossible. I would like to conclude with one particularly important theatre-related vase-painting, which crystallizes visually the instrumentality of Hephaestus and his primordial drunken processional return to Olympus in an unparalleled way. In the fifth century B.C.E. Comedy appears personified on only three known vases. She is visualized as a maenad in a Dionysiac thiasos, on two occasions with another maenad representing Tragedy.³⁷ But just one vase, a red-figured bell krater of about 430 B.C.E. now in the Louvre (Fig. 2), shows her without her solemn sister genre. It depicts Hephaestus in a procession led by the *aulos*-playing satyr Marsyas, along with Dionysus and a maenad named ΚΩΜΩΙΔΙΑ, who are both holding a thyrsus and a kantharos. Hephaestus is thus visualized not only as Dionysus’s chief Olympian companion, but as part of the very aetiology of comic theatre and satyric poetry themselves.³⁸

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36. See further, Hall (2006) 328–31.

37. See further, Hall (2007).

38. After I first researched and delivered this paper at the Patras conference, I discovered the thesis of Natale (2008), supervised by Cornelia Isler-Kerényi, which collects and collates a larger collection of evidence and covers some similar ground. But his argument is not focused on the precise relationship between the Dionysiac ritual aspect of Hephaestean laughter, the early theatre, and Hephaistos’s medical condition. I am very grateful to Cornelia Isler-Kerényi and Fabian Zogg for helpful comments when I delivered this paper in Zurich in 2017.

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