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The sacrileges of 415 and the gods of comedy

I have previously argued that we should interpret Aristophanes' *Birds* neither as an escapist fantasy nor as a political satire on the grand ambitions of the as-yet inconclusive Sicilian expedition, as most previous criticism had done, but we should instead see it as a covert response to what was surely the more current topic of conversation in early 414, namely the snowballing witch-hunt of notable young Athenians in response to moralistic indignation over what were perceived as acts of extreme disrespect for traditional religious institutions[1]. The two heroes of *Birds*, Peisthetairos and Euelpides, the man who "persuades his *hetairoi*" and the man "of good hope", specifically claim at the play's outset to be fleeing Athens because of all the "litigation" that pervades the city. The excess of litigation that would be foremost on the mind of an audience in early 414 clearly relates to the prosecutions of those alleged to have participated in the mutilation of the herms or parodying the Eleusinian Mysteries[2]. Andocides' *On the Mysteries* gives us a flavor of how recklessly allegations might be fabricated by those compelled to "name names," in a narrative that can only remind those educated in American history with the Red Scare of the 1950s and the overly broad net

1 Hubbard 1991, 158-82; Hubbard 1997.

2 For the same contention, shortly before publication of my book, see Ničev 1989, 13-5. This thesis was long ago proposed by Droysen 1835-36, and supported by Croiset 1909, 121-2, but subsequently ignored. Five years after my book, Furley (1996, 136-40) proposed a similar interpretation, but was apparently unaware of my treatment of *Birds*. That the prosecutions and their effects continued to linger into the winter of 414-13 is established by the epigraphical evidence concerning sale of the exiles' property, which was substantial enough to equal a year's tribute revenue; see Lewis 1966, 181-6. By the time of *Birds'* production in Spring 414, it was already abundantly clear that many of the informers, like Diocleides, were untrustworthy and innocent people had been swept up in the accusations.

of communist subversion envisioned by Senator Joseph McCarthy and later by the John Birch Society. Both historical eruptions were occasioned by genuine fears of what were perceived by the general public as real threats to Athenian and American democracy.

In 1991, my emphasis was upon identifying aspects of *Birds* that supported the concerns of traditional moralists about the influence of sophistic doctrines in creating disrespect for traditional civic cult and ritual. Peisthetaerus, whom I in no way see as a favorable or sympathetic character, actually does what Socrates' enemies later accused him of doing, namely creating new gods and disrespecting those of the city, through clever intellectual construction positing a new theogony, interrupting sacrifices to the traditional gods, and ultimately appropriating Sovereignty for his own selfish ends. In 1997, I extended my interpretation by identifying Nephelokokkygia as a sophistic Utopia, which by the end of the play is revealed as a totalitarian Dystopia.

But Aristophanes is too subtle to be one-sided in his comic targets. I would today propose to flip the coin and look instead at how the *Birds* may attack the self-proclaimed moralists who led the prosecutions and the rather wooden, humorless piety toward traditional divine cult that they presumed to defend. I would like to argue that the same reactionary pietism, which had manifested itself in multiple prosecutions for impiety since the beginning of the Peloponnesian War[3], was also a threat to Comedy itself and its many customary freedoms with the seriousness of the gods and its frequent burlesques of civic ritual, which Angus Bowie (1993) has richly documented. Indeed, it may have even been the light-hearted treatment of the gods in Comedy that inspired the upper-class hijinx behind the sacrileges of 415, not any broad conspiracy to subvert the democracy[4].

3 For a survey of these incidents as precursors to the acute religious anxiety provoked by the sacrileges of 415, see Rubel 2014, 18-73. The devastation of the Plague left the superstitious especially vulnerable to fear of divine anger against Athens if acts of impiety or pollution were left unpunished.

4 For this widespread allegation, see Thuc. 6.27.3, 6.28.2, 6.61.1-4; And. 1.36, 1.42. A minority of modern historians give credence to this theory; see Lehmann 1987, and

Andocides names at least three comic poets as involved with the unofficial private performances of the mysteries (1.13), possibly including improvised props and elements of parody familiar to the comic imagination[5]. We know of one and possibly two late 5th century comic poets named Aristomenes, to whom a *Dionysus Askêtês* is attributed[6]. Two other comic poets, Cephisodorus and Archippus, were also named[7].

Mann 2007, 244-61; suspicions at the time could have been fueled by the oligarchic leanings of the *hetairiai* that were identified as responsible (on which, see McGlew 1999), as well as the Spartan troops advancing to the Isthmus and the attempted oligarchic coup by Alcibiades' associates in Argos, not to mention Diocleides' false testimony about seeing 300 men amassed at night. However, both Thucydides and Andocides were writing with hindsight after the events of 411, so the majority of historians reject this view. See Aurenche 1974, 89-101; Kagan 1981, 205-9; Ostwald 1986, 329-30, 549-50; Rubel 2014, 82-9; Roberts 2017, 195. Dover (in Gomme, Andrewes, Dover 1970, 285-6) speculates that such a carefully planned and executed operation as the mutilation of nearly all the herms in the city could be meant to signal the strength and number of the conspirators (however, contrary to And. 1.62, the biographer Cratippus [64F3 *FGrH*] says it was only the herms in the Agora), as well as pledging the loyalty of club-members (also suggested as a motive by Euphiletus; cf. And. 1.67). MacDowell 1962, 190-3, and Green 1970, 115-27, think it more likely an attempt by wealthy anti-war parties to disrupt the departure of the Sicilian expedition with bad omens; see also Furley 1996, 30.

5 Murray 1990 [b], 155-6, denies that these were "parodies," but given the smaller setting inside private houses, these could at best be pathetic re-enactments of the grand ceremony in the Eleusinian Telesterion. Most critics agree that the re-enactments of the Mysteries before non-initiates had no political motive whatever, since they were never meant to terrorize the public; they were more about conscious tweaking of traditional religious piety by smart-alec young aristocrats, similar to later fourth-century clubs like the Triballoi or indeed to Cavalier or Tory clubs of 17th-18th century England (Murray 1990 [b], 157-60). However, Furley (1996, 34-40), citing Plutarch (*Nic.* 13.1), believes Alcibiades and the war party faced strong opposition from the Eleusinian priestly clans and hence wanted to mock their authority.

6 This Aristomenes appears to have been very long-lived, only the third poet to have recorded a Lenaean victory (*IG* II2 2325, l. 120 = T3 *PCG*), roughly contemporaneous with Telecleides and Cratinus, competing against Aristophanes' *Knights* in 424 BCE (according to a hypothesis of that play = T4A *PCG*), and still competing against *Plutus* in 388 BCE (according to that play's hypothesis = T4B *PCG*). T5 *PCG* attests other plays in the 390s. However, the *Suda* (T1 *PCG*) places his *floruit* in the first years of the Peloponnesian War. It is possible that we may be dealing with two different comic poets here, the latter a son or grandson of the same name. If so, we may suspect that it was the younger Aristomenes who as a wild youth became involved with the aristocratic clubs.

7 In favor of all three being the comic poets, see MacDowell 1962, 211, and Gomme, Andrewes, Dover 1970, 281 n. 6. As MacDowell says, with reference to Aristophanes' ritual parodies, «Of all kinds of person, who is more likely to enjoy a mock-ceremony than a comic dramatist?». Cephisodorus won a victory in 402 (Lys. 21.4 = T2

Telecleides' *Sterroi* ("The Stiff Ones") featured a sacrifice-hungry Hermes as a character (fr. 35 *PCG*); two of the other three fragments we have from this play (frr. 33, 36) feature witticism of a sexual nature, possibly implying the perpetually stiff herms as a theme of comic treatment and thus suggesting practical jokes to youthful pranksters[8]. As Robin Osborne has observed, the square, rigid herms, probably introduced into Athens by the Peisistratid Hipparchus and often adorned with nuggets of his 6th century wisdom, were an enduring and ubiquitous marker of archaism in contrast to the developing naturalism of late fifth-century sculpture[9]. They of course seemed ridiculous to the young and irreverent, symbols of a fusty traditionalism against which they chafed[10].

It should therefore not surprise us if comic poets felt themselves on the defensive in this environment. By constructing a comic plot in which the traditional Olympians Poseidon and Heracles appear craven and ineffective[11], and the rule of Zeus is ultimately overthrown, Aristophanes boldly reasserts against the moralists a comic vision of gods who are human, all too human. A decade later, *Frogs* reiterates the same defiant message with a distinctly

PCG), immediately after the recall of those exiled in 403. Archippus appears to have already been active as a comic poet before the exile, credited with a victory in the same Olympiad (*Suda* α 4115 = T1 *PCG*). At least two of his plays (*Fish* and *Rhinon*) date to the period immediately after the recall of the exiles, and *Fish,* of which many fragments are preserved thanks to Athenaeus (who dedicated a monograph to the play, according to 7.329c), seems in many ways to be an undersea version of Aristophanes' *Birds*, suggesting this was a play for which Archippus had a special appreciation; see Kaibel 1889, 49-55; Wilkins 2000, 529; Farioli 2001, 157-70.

8 Telecleides was roughly contemporaneous to Cratinus and Pherecrates, judging from his position in the victory lists of *IG* II2 2325 (= T3-4 *PCG*).

9 Osborne 1985, 51-2.

10 As Rubel 2014, 89, notes, a pelike dating to around 470 BCE (Lausanne 3250) shows a satyr approaching a nearby herm with an axe, so herm mutilation was proba-by already a familiar prank 55 years before the events of 415. Thuc. 6.28.1 says that there were previous attacks on public statues by drunk young men.

11 Critical opinion has not been kind to the Olympian ambassadors: see, for instance, MacDowell 1995, 221, who attributes their mockery to the general license of the Dionysian festival. Some scholars have resorted to political allegory: Solomos 1974, 175, sees in each of them Athenian enemies (Poseidon = Corinth, Heracles = Dorians, Triballos = Thracians), and Katz 1976, 353-63, sees the three leaders of the Sicilian expedition (Poseidon = Nicias, Heracles = Lamachus, Triballos = Alcibiades).

comic, costume-shifting Dionysus and even parodies the Eleusinian Mysteries, albeit not the supposedly secret initiation rites[12]. Were the sacrileges of 415 really any worse than what people had seen many times on the comic stage? Did they not represent merely a privatized appropriation of the comic license that was normally reserved for civic ritual at the festivals of Dionysus?[13].

Central to consideration of the moralistic threat to Comedy is the much-discussed Decree of Syracosios, attested in a *scholium* to *Birds* 1297, which in turn cites Phrynichus' *Hermit* (fr. 27 *PCG*), complaining of not being able to attack those whom he most wants to attack[14]. Reviving an old thesis of Droysen, Alan Sommerstein has argued that Syracosios' decree aimed to prevent comedy from giving prominence to those indicted in the sacrileges of 415, as if to punish Alcibiades and the other miscreants with a *damnatio memoriae*[15]. However, Stephen Halliwell has challenged the historicity of Syracosios' decree by objecting that such a motivation was incoherent[16]: why would Syracosios or any

12 Keller (1931, 54-61) regarded the Mysteries as off limits, however frivolous Aristophanes' treatment of traditional mythology. However, Scullion (2014, 344-9) finds no evidence of particular seriousness in their depiction within *Frogs*. Generally, he regards Aristophanes' work as replete with plenty of material that echoes traditional piety side by side with a highly ironic treatment of the gods that would be appreciated by the sceptical.

13 On the analogy between the characteristic debunking or parody of cult in Comedy and the private performances of the Mysteries, see Furley 1996, 33.

14 We know from *Hypothesis* I to *Birds* that this play was also presented at the Dionysia of 414. For Phrynichus' work as a key intertext in *Birds*, see Kakridis 1970; Giner, de Hoz 1979, 114-6.

15 Droysen 1835-36, 59-61; Sommerstein 1986. Atkinson 1992, 62-4, believes that Syracosius' decree only forbade malicious attacks on those who had been exonerated in the prosecutions, but one then has to wonder why *Birds* has no direct allusions to such ripe targets as Alcibiades and the others who were condemned.

16 Halliwell 1991. On different grounds, Trevett (2000) also doubts the decree's reality: he believes that Phrynichus was referring to the Syracusans denying comic poets some of their favorite targets by causing so many prominent Athenians to be away from home. But it is hardly likely that ψῶρ' ἔχει Συρακόσιον with no article could mean "may the mange afflict the Syracusans", nor can the Syracusans really be said to have "taken away" (ἀφείλετο) Athenian citizens due to a campaign that was entirely Athens' choosing. In another fragment of the same play (fr. 23 *PCG*), Phrynichus does in fact mention Nicias, so in no meaningful sense did Phrynichus believe people were taken away as comic targets due to being on campaign in Sicily. Maxwell-Stuart 1973, 400, even thinks Nicias the primary target of Phrynichus' play.

other prosecutor want to protect Alcibiades and other privileged young scapegraces from what would surely have been withering comic ridicule in the wake of their condemnation? Halliwell further objects that comedy did in fact allude to the sacrileges, but none of the passages he lists actually mention defendants by name: *Birds* 766-7 merely mentions the class of *atimoi*, and *Lysistrata* 1093-4 warns men to hide their erections lest they attract the attention of the Hermocopidae. *Lysistrata*, like Eupolis' *Demes*, which features an informer who tried to extort money from a metic he accused of illegal performance of the mysteries (fr. 99.78-113 *PCG*)[17], comes a few years later, and Syracosios' decree may have been meant to apply only to the immediate aftermath of the prosecutions or may have had less salience, if it ever was enforceable, by 412 or 411. What I would like to suggest in response to Halliwell is that Syracosios' decree was never meant to punish the defendants of the sacrilege trials so much as to punish Comedy as a genre for having inspired such disrespect of civic institutions. One could hardly legislate that Comedy no longer depict the gods, as mythological comedy was by this point already too well established. But reactionary politicians could attempt to limit the boundaries of comic *parrhesia* in other respects, and it must surely have frustrated comic poets if they could not allude to the perpetrators of the recent scandal more directly. In Syracosios' view, the recent events were not a laughing matter and should be kept away from Comedy, to the extent possible.

But as we know from subversive literature created under the eyes of other illiberal regimes, poets can always devise ways to test or undermine official suppression through more covert strategies of communication that maintain a pretense of plausible deniability. Although Syracosios might succeed in banning explicit mention of certain prosecutions or convicted defendants, he did not apparently succeed in banning his own mention or that of other prosecutors. Syracosios himself is called a "jay" in *Birds* 1297, hence prompting the *scholium* that preserves our

17 For a review of scholarship on this scene, see Storey 2003, 165-9, although Storey himself favors an earlier date for the play.

information about his decree. Two of the most prominent demagogues proposing rewards for testimony against perpetrators of sacrilege were Cleonymus and Peisander, each of whom earns an ode late in the *Birds*, in a section of the play populated by both human and divine sycophants (1470-81, 1553-64)[18]. Neither ode specifically mentions their recent proposals or involvement in prosecutions, but each subjects them to ridicule: Cleonymus is big, threw his shield away in battle, and is imagined as a sycophant-tree sending its shoots out in every directions (with the verb *sykophantei* punning on *syka phainei* or the like). Peisander is so desperate, presumably to find witnesses, that he joins Socrates in a rite of necromancy to conjure up the dead. Similarly Phrynichus, whom the Aristophanes *scholia* cite as a critic of Syracosios' decree, denounces two of the most unscrupulous false informants, Diocleides and Teucrus, by warning Hermes not to fall over and break his protruding member, lest he cause a scandal and provide rewards to these two. This fragment (fr. 61 *PCG*) is unassigned and therefore not precisely datable, but it must not be very far from the events, since the otherwise obscure Diocleides and Teucrus would fade from memory too long after; it may well be from the *Hermit* and thus co-eval with *Birds*. Plato Comicus devoted an entire play to Peisander, making him the title character (frr. 102-13 *PCG*)[19], and Telecleides ridicules Charicles, one of the appointed investigators (according to Andocides 1.36), as a hypocrite who was himself blackmailed (fr. 44 *PCG*, perhaps from the suggestively titled *Truth Tellers*). So although we find surprisingly few mentions of the miscreants

18 Earlier criticism (*e.g.* Harman 1920, 97) was prone to dismiss these odes as «topical gibberish [. . .] designed for the purpose of diverting too critical attention from the dangerous scenes which they enclose». More recent criticism, however, interprets them as a connected sequence that both parodies ethnographic writing and interacts with significant background themes of the play; see Moulton 1981, 29-46; Hubbard, 1991, 176-82; Rusten 2013.

19 For this play as a "demagogue-comedy," see Sommerstein 2000, 439-40. However, Sommerstein believes it came earlier in Plato's career, based on Aristophanes' claim in the revised parabasis of *Clouds* (557-9) that other comic poets were imitating his attack on Cleon in *Knights*. However, that passage does not mention Plato and refers rather to attacks on Hyperbolus. Radermacher 1926, 54-7, also favors an early date on other grounds. However, Peisander's greatest prominence did not come until 415.

themselves in our remains of contemporaneous comedy, the prosecutors were focal targets.

Neither Syracosios' decree nor any other legislative attempts to restrict Comedy had the effect of intimidating comic poets into more circumspect treatment of the gods or traditional religion. Indeed, the evidence of the comic fragments, which Angus Bowie has treated in a 2000 article, suggests that if anything, mythological themes in comedy became more common during the last two decades of the 5th century[20]. But they had plenty of precedent even earlier: one of Aristophanes' earliest plays, *Babylonians* (426 BCE), featured Dionysus as a character (fr. 75 *PCG*), as did Eupolis' probably early *Taxiarchs*, where an inept and effeminate Dionysus is taught rowing by the admiral Phormio[21]. Dionysus as Paris as Pericles played the title role in Cratinus' *Dionysalexandrus*[22]. Cratinus' *Cheirons* also deployed mythological allegory to attack Pericles, including a new theogony (fr. 258 *PCG*) in which Chronos (Cronus?) and Stasis conceive a new tyrant of the gods, not the "cloud-gatherer" Zeus, but a "head-gatherer," that is, one adept at assembling votes. Aspasia is characterized as his "Hera," the daughter of Katapugosyne (fr. 259 *PCG*). While the comic Dionysus was a common enough theme[23], given the god's

20 Bowie 2000, 321-2.

21 Our primary testimonium for this play is *Schol.* Ar. *Pax* 348e-f Koster. For a review of the fragments and other evidence for this play and its date, see Storey 2003, 246-60. Most critics (*e.g.* Norwood 1963, 197-8) think it datable to around 428-27 BCE, since Phormio disappears from Thucydides' narrative at this point, but Storey, based on the frequent references to Phormio in later plays, thinks it could date to 415, when many Athenians who had grown disused to naval training were being called back to service; in this view, Phormio was a representative of old-fashioned military discipline, parallel to the dead statesmen Eupolis brought back to advise Athens in the *Demes*. Bowie 1988, 185, on the other hand, regards Phormio as a war-monger like Lamachus in the *Acharnians*, and thus views *Taxiarchs* within the framework of the anti-war plays of the 420s.

22 We have fairly good evidence for the plot of this play due to a partially preserved papyrus hypothesis (*P.Oxy.* 663 = T1 *PCG*; for detailed treatment, see Luppe 1966). For the multi-layered mixture of political allegory, satyric influences, and mythological burlesque that we find in this play, see the interpretations of Schwarze 1971, 6-21, and Bakola 2010, 81-102, 180-208, 252-75.

23 Bowie 2000, 319-20, counts at least sixteen plays involving Dionysus as a character. See also Storey 2003, 251, who notes that Dionysus often takes on a genuinely dramatic role, playing another character like Heracles (in *Frogs*) or Paris (in *Dionysalexandrus*).

patronage of the dramatic festivals, here we have an imagined substitution of a human tyrant for Zeus, perhaps a comic version of the tyrannical Zeus in *Prometheus Bound*[24].

Athenaeus tells us that an unknown play of Cratinus (fr. 370 *PCG*) treated Aphrodite's love for the ferryman Phaon. First attested in the mythographer Palaephatus, the usual story is that Aphrodite appeared to Phaon in disguise as an old woman, whom he ferried across the sea free of charge; as a reward, she gave him an unguent that made him irresistably attractive to women[25]. Phaon became a popular figure in late 5th-century vase painting, including a calyx krater in Bologna (288 *bis*) which shows Aphrodite stepping onto his boat. Cratinus' innovative twist on the myth was to make Phaon's attractions irresistable to Aphrodite herself as well. The fragment describes her hiding Phaon in a bed of lettuce, which suggests allusion to the Adonis myth, since Adonis was killed in a field of lettuce; however, lettuce is also associated with infertility and impotence[26]. The details of this myth reveal deep comic potential for Cratinus to exploit, and it is no surprise that Plato Comicus later takes up the same themes of Aphrodisian desire for younger men in plays entitled *Phaon* and *Adonis*[27].

Telecleides is generally assumed to have been roughly contemporaneous with Cratinus, since both Pericles and Nicias are among his targets. We have already noted his *Sterroi* (the "Rigid Ones"), which appears to allude to the ithyphallic herms and Hermes' greed for sacrifices (fr. 35 *PCG*). Another fragment of Telecleides calls Zeus a pederast (fr. 52 *PCG*). That Zeus himself

24 On this play, which also seems to be replete with yearning for a return to the Golden Age before such tyrannies, see Norwood 1963, 125-9; Schwarze 1971, 55-64. See Luiselli 1990, 94-8, for the parallel to Zeus as new tyrant in *Prometheus Bound* 219-25, displacing Cronus, traditionally the god of the Golden Age; Farioli 2000, 415-24, adds to the Promethean inspiration the likelihood that Pericles as a tyrannical Zeus displacing Cronus (= Cimon) also lies behind other Cratinean comedies, such as *Nemesis*, *Thracians*, and *Plutoi*. She even believes that these plots about an illegitimate Zeus inspired the *Birds*. However, Noussia 2003, 78-9, doubts any allusion to *Prometheus Bound*.

25 Palaeph. 48 (Festa, *Mythographi Graeci* 3.2). For the unguent, see Ael. *VH* 12.15, and Serv. *ad Aen.* 3.279

26 Detienne 1994, 67-71, citing Eub. fr. 13 *PCG*, Amphis fr. 20 *PCG*, and Athen. 2.69c.

27 On the Phaon comedies, see Wilamowitz 1913, 35-6.

was not above comic treatment is clear: an unattributed comic fragment (Adesp. fr. 45 *PCG*) describes Zeus waking up from slumber and sending Hermes to deliver a message. His slumber was probably erotically induced, as in *Iliad* 14. Aristophanes' *Daedalus* concerned Zeus using the arts of Daedalus to change himself into various shapes and getting away with wrongdoing, whether erotic (frr. 191, 193-4, suggesting Leda and the swan) or criminal (fr. 198, on assuming the guise of Eurybatus). Zeus' many love affairs provided rich targets for comic invention in the work of Plato Comicus, whose titles included *Europa, Io, Zeus Kakoumenos,* and *Long Night*, probably about Zeus disguised as Amphitryon, himself giving a title to two plays of Archippus. So Comedy's reach was not limited to the obvious examples of Dionysus and gods treated humorously in Homeric epic or the hymns (Aphrodite, Hephaestus, Hermes, Pan). If even Zeus could be treated as a god of Comedy, none of them were truly off limits. Creative new theogonies perverting the traditional Hesiodic account and the multiplying Orphic alternatives were not unique to the *Birds*, as we see from a substantial papyrus fragment of an unknown comedy (Adesp. fr. 215 *CGFP*) in which Cronus gobbles up his children because of being unable to repay a debt to Apollo; the genealogical absurdity of Apollo preceding the children of Cronus suggests an inventive elasticity with no bounds.

Of course the date of this fragment is uncertain, and the chronology of Plato Comicus' titles is completely obscure. But there is ample evidence that comic treatment of the gods did not abate after the sacrileges of 415, nor even after Socrates' condemnation for corrupting the youth and creating new gods in 399. Strattis' *Phoenissae*, which surely follows Euripides' play of 409, shows Dionysus hung from a tree (fr. 46 *PCG*). Archippus' *Fish*, which dates to 401 or later, names various priests of the gods after fish species (frr. 17-8 *PCG*). Bowie concludes that mythological titles may account for as much as one third of Old Comedy and, if anything, they become more frequent in the last two decades of the 5th century. Heinz-Günther Nesselrath has extended this observation into Middle Comedy, noting especially the frequency of plays about divine birth stories, which necessarily involve only gods,

but reduce them to a common, humanly recognizable domestic stature[28]. However, titles are not by themselves always enough to give us a full view of a play's content or the prominence of represented deities or cult within its plot. We also need to examine available fragments and testimonia. One would not suspect, for instance, merely from its title that Eupolis' *Baptae* centered upon the orgiastic rites of the Thracian goddess Cotyto, but Juvenal (2.91-92) and his *scholia* tell us that it did[29]. Similarly, one should not over-interpret titles: if we had only the title of Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, we might think it was primarily a parody of this annual women's ritual, whereas in fact the Thesmophoria festival is little more than the setting for dramatic events that are quite separate from its ritual aspects.

Finally, let us return to Aristophanes' *Birds* and look more closely at the actual representation of the all-too-human gods at the end of the play. As appropriate in a theomachy leading to the overthrow of the traditional divine order, the plot first unfolds in a paratragic vein, with the grand Aeschylean rebel Prometheus reduced to the status of a sneaky informer hiding beneath his parasol; as Angus Bowie suggests based on a *scholium* to this passage, the parasol may parody elements of the Panathenaic ritual[30]. Like his tragic model, this Prometheus knows a secret that will overthrow his arch-enemy, namely that the gods themselves are facing a rebellion within their own ranks and Peisthetaerus has merely to demand Basileia from Zeus and he will effectively control the universe. Armed with this Promethean foreknowledge, Peisthetaerus is more than prepared to negotiate with the coming divine embassy. The three ambassadors reveal the inherent rottenness and vulnerability of the Olympian order: only Poseidon is one of the original Olympians, a representative of civic Athenian cult and ancient patron of the aristocratic order defined by the horse-riding knights. Athenian myth also characterizes him as a sore loser in his con-

28 Bowie 2000, 318-22; Nesselrath 1995. On Middle Comedy, see also Konstantakos 2014.

29 For more on this goddess and her role in the play, see Storey 2003, 98-101.

30 Bowie 1993, 162.

test with Athena, flooding a section of Attica out of spite. Heracles is a latecomer to the pantheon, a man become god, still very much subject to his gluttonous appetite, brutish in his manners, and such a *habitué* of the comic stage that Aristophanes can elsewhere allude to the voracious Heracles as a stock-figure his brand of clever comedy eschews (*Wasps* 60; *Peace* 741). But even more lowly is the Triballian god, not speaking Greek and product of a central Balkan people so uncouth as to make even the Thracians appear civilized. That the Olympian gods are so enervated and weak that they feel threatened by a Triballian rebellion, as Prometheus informs us, confirms the declining status of their cult. Heracles views the Triballian as little more than another monster he can overcome with raw force, and Poseidon decries his presence as a necessary concession to the ever-widening franchise of the divine democracy. The Triballian's presence in the embassy may also satirically reflect the growing trend toward syncretism in Greek religion, whereby exotic foreign gods and cults are adopted and flourish with a vigor lacking in their more traditional counterparts. Only a year or two prior to *Birds* Eupolis' *Baptae* made fun of the rites of Cotyto, and as Angus Bowie has also shown, foreign rituals were a particularly favored target of comic derision[31]. But his presence as a voting equal to an ancient Greek divinity like Poseidon suggests a Herodotean cultural relativism with regard to divine cult, even as Heracles' presence suggests that the boundaries between divine and human have gradually collapsed. That Poseidon attempts to persuade Heracles not to hand over Basileia on the ground that he will then fail to inherit sovereignty when Zeus dies tells us that the gods are not even considered truly immortal any more. That the gods are now ready to abdicate sovereignty in return for the Birds' cooperation in helping them maintain certain token ritual observances indicates the depth to which actual religious belief in their power has sunk.

From this perspective, *Birds* may enact the most radical rejection of traditional religious piety that Attic Comedy had ever

31 Bowie 2000, 327-9.

produced[32]. Sommerstein has argued that we have some precedent for *Birds* in comedies like Cratinus' *Ploutoi* and Telecleides' *Amphictyons*, which present a return to the Golden Age of Cronus[33]. But this play goes even further by stepping outside the Hesiodic system altogether. Were the drunken acts of a few young men in 415, possibly inspired by Comedy in making fun of traditional religious images, really so outrageous in comparison? At the same time, however, Aristophanes could maintain plausible deniability against any charges that he was himself disrespecting the gods by arguing that his play was really an attack on the sophistic will to power embodied by Peisthetaerus and practiced by sundry other characters mentioned in the play, including Socrates, Gorgias, and Cinesias. From that point of view, he showed the overthrow of the Olympian gods as a nightmarish dystopian vision of where contemporary intellectual and social trends were headed.

Prosecutorial zealots like Syracosios, Cleonymus, and Peisander can hardly have been pleased by *Birds*. But what could they do about it? Aristophanes had complied with the technical requirements of Syracosios' decree by not naming the sacrilege defendants or directly alluding to their prosecutions. But he did succeed, however obliquely, in suggesting the ultimate silliness and self-destructiveness of the enveloping moral panic and in reasserting people's right to view the gods and their cults through the lens of humor and comic entertainment, from which nothing could be held sacred and inviolate. As we have shown, satirical treatment of the gods and religion was already much too deeply embedded in the very essence of Comedy to ever be made the subject of a formal prohibition.

It is interesting that another club of aristocratic youth, including Demosthenes' enemy Conon (54.39), committed even worse civic sacrileges in the fourth century, such as stealing sacrificial meat left for Hecate or the testicles of pigs sacrificed to purify

32 In the judgment of Strauss 1966, 189-92, it was the «most shocking» of Aristophanes' plays.

33 Sommerstein 1987, 2.

the Assembly; perhaps in homage to the *Birds,* they called themselves "Triballoi," whom Prometheus had identified as the chief rebels against Zeus' leadership. Although mentioned in 4th century comedy, such as fr. 75.3 *PCG* of Eubulus, their acts did not provoke a convulsive political uproar comparable to the sacrileges of 415. Perhaps Comedy had by this point taught Athenians that laughter was the better response to youthful pranks and mischief.

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Abstract

This paper examines how Aristophanes' *Birds* attacks the self-proclaimed moralists who led the prosecutions and the humorless piety toward traditional divine cult that they presumed to defend. This reactionary pietism was also a threat to Comedy's many customary freedoms with the seriousness of the gods and its frequent burlesques of civic ritual, which may have even inspired the aristocratic hijinx behind the sacrileges. By constructing a comic plot in which the Olympians appear craven and ineffective, and the rule of Zeus is ultimately overthrown, Aristophanes boldly reasserts against the moralists a comic vision of gods who are all too human. Were the sacrileges of 415 really any worse than what people had seen many times on the comic stage? Central to consideration of the moralistic threat to Comedy is the much-discussed Decree of Syracosios. This paper argues that Syracosios' decree was never meant to punish the sacrilege defendants so much as to punish Comedy as a genre for having inspired disrespect of civic institutions. To Syracosios, the sacrileges were no laughing matter.

Keywords

Aristophanes – *Birds* – Syracosios – Decree of Syracosios – Zeus – gods

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