

RITUAL ASPECTS OF ARISTOPHANES' *BIRDS*

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ABSTRACT

This article expands on recent scholarly attention to the ritual aspects of Athenian Old Comedy, including its possibly cultic and civic functions within the performative setting of the Great Dionysia, and proposes the use of linguistic and other tools as a means of providing deeper appreciation of such aspects of the plays. The article argues the point by applying these tools to a study of the use and occurrence of hymnic, sacrificial and wedding language and themes in Aristophanes' *Birds*, and by examining the interplay of the stage action with the festival's surrounding ritual and civic events.

Introduction

Despite its concurrent performance with tragedy in religious festivals – in particular the City (or Great) Dionysia and the Lenaia – Athenian Old Comedy has admittedly been much less examined than tragedy as to its treatment of the gods and its use of ritual language and themes within the framework of those festivals.¹ This may be because, at least at first blush, the gods appear to have a less dominant role in the 'plots'² of Old Comedy than they seem to in tragedy.³

¹ Bowie 1993:10 sees it as an open question 'whether the [comedies] act like a religious rite themselves in which order is restored out of disorder...'

² I use the term 'plot' loosely as applied to comedy, recognising that it does not fit within the definition of ὁ μῦθος in Arist. *Poet.* 1450a-51a as a unified arrangement of events having a beginning, middle and end; and that comedy has a relatively non-linear structure, punctuated by hymns or running jokes that often seem to be included for their own sake rather than to 'advance' any action. Along these lines Segal 2001:5-6, 9 discerns more of a 'comic process', whereby comedy represents 'a dreamsong of a revel in the country'.

³ Halliwell 1987:13 takes it as a 'fundamental proposition that the universe portrayed in all the Greek tragedies we know ... is one in which significant human action is never regarded as wholly autonomous or independent of larger, non-human powers.' The same could not so sweepingly be said of the extant comedies.

In some comedies, for example, the gods barely appear relevant at all.⁴ In others, they are supplanted by the human protagonists; indeed, to the extent that there is a plot in such plays, replacement of the gods is often the gist of it.⁵ Perhaps as a result, scholarship has tended to focus on Old Comedy's possibly ritual origins,⁶ its relationship to tragedy as a dramatic form,⁷ its relationship to aspects of Athenian society,⁸ its relationship to 'public religion',⁹ its relationship to particular historical and political events,¹⁰ its use of obscenity,¹¹ and its performative aspects.¹²

⁴ E.g. *Vesp.* The Aristophanic texts and translations are from Henderson 2000-7.

⁵ This is notably the case in *Aves* as Peisetairus' great scheme, but is also clear in the plans to indict, starve or otherwise overcome Zeus or other gods in *Pax* 102-8 and 403-24 and in *Plut.* 123-46; the cessation of offerings to the gods in *Plut.* 1113-17 and 1172-87; and in passages where mortals seem to put themselves on a par with gods, as in *Plut.* 659-747, or are otherwise likened to them, as in *Eq.* 1335-36, *Vesp.* 650-54, and *Av.* 1763-65.

⁶ Arist. *Poet.* 1449a 11, to the effect that comedy had its origins in the φαλλικά, is a general starting point for such discussions; and the *pompē* of the Great Dionysia was in fact 'the occasion of the most elaborate phallic processions', Csapo 1997:284; but see Scullion 2002 (wholly rejecting any Dionysian associations with drama, whether tragedy or comedy).

⁷ See e.g. Farmer 2017, analysing a 'culture of tragedy' within comedy; Taplin 1986: 173, concluding that tragedy and comedy 'are [like] planets in orbit round two different suns'; cf. Silk 2000:81, taking issue with scholarship's tendency to 'privilege tragedy over comedy'.

⁸ See e.g. Rothwell 2007, postulating a relationship between archaic symposiast practices and *kōmos* revels associated with comedy; Konstan 1997, analysing *Birds*' reflection of Athens' internal contradictions.

⁹ See e.g. Parker 2005, rejecting the view that dramatic choruses perform a ritual function.

¹⁰ See e.g. Ober and Strauss 1990:264-69, linking the themes of *Thesm.* with certain democratising decrees in the 'real world' of early fourth-century Athens.

¹¹ See e.g. Halliwell 2008:211, concluding that Aristophanes has 'internalised ritual laughter within Old Comedy'; Worman 2008, examining a number of forms of insult; Henderson 1975:15-16, suggesting that comedic poets found a freedom to insult by virtue of scurrilous language used in Dionysian cult practices.

¹² See e.g. Bierl 2009; Foley 2000; Lada-Richards 1999; McLeish 1980; see also Henderson 2013:279-80, contrasting the mediating functions of the chorus in tragedy and comedy; cf. Gagné and Hopman 2013, examining ways in which the tragic chorus can serve as a direct intermediary between various levels of reference, but leaving open for further exploration any ritual functions of the comic chorus; and Henrichs 1995:59, 90, focusing on self-referentiality on the part of the tragic chorus.

Recent scholarship, however, has expanded to focus on relationships between Old Comedy and ritual. Thus Natalia Tsoumpra, in the context of her study of power relationships in certain of the comedies, examined multiple variations on sacrificial themes in the role of the Sausage-Seller in *Knights*;¹³ and further observed how the ascendant Peisetairus' roasting of the dissident birds in *Birds* reflects the characteristically 'unbridled consumption [and] cannibalism' of tyrants in 'perversion of ... sacrificial ritual'.¹⁴ In addition, James Redfield put renewed focus on Old Comedy's treatment of animal sacrifice by presenting an 'alternative view' to the earlier studies of Burkert and Vernant, emphasising not the pathos of the act of killing but the 'nourishment and joy' that come from 'eating sacrificed animals', benefits often seen portrayed in the concluding marriage feasts found in various of the plays.¹⁵ And, in a prior article, I examined how *Clouds*' language and themes parallel those of certain ritual events of the Great Dionysia.¹⁶

The question posed by this article is whether a more detailed examination of Aristophanes' use of ritual language and themes in *Birds* may shed additional light on Old Comedy's interplay with Greek religion. What, in other words, do we gain by identifying ritual material or overtones in the play? To some extent, the very presence of such material suggests an embedded role to be played by Old Comedy within the broader framework of Greek religion, or at least within a specific Dionysian festival setting. But that merely begs the question as to the nature of any such role.

It is now recognised that the theatre's audience was far from monolithic.¹⁷ As a result, the mocking contradictions of comic heroes may well have highlighted divisions within the city depending on how the words or

¹³ Tsoumpra 2013:128-38.

¹⁴ Tsoumpra 2013:217-18 (citing *inter alia* Arist. *Pol.* 1253a31-37).

¹⁵ Redfield 2012, elaborating the importance of comedy's invading as well as bridging the worlds of man/beast/god; see also Lada-Richards 1999:22: 'It is Dionysus par excellence who annihilates the frontiers between beast and god.'

¹⁶ Straus 2011. As pointed out by Cartledge 1990:7, there was a clear connection not merely between fifth-century comedy and earlier rites, but also to then-current Dionysian celebrations, in that the central event at both the Great Dionysia and the Lenaia was a 'ritual procession to Dionysus' sanctuary followed by animal sacrifice and a rare meat supper.' Parker 2005:139 also recognises a relationship between comedy and festival rituals, although he essentially limits the connection to comedy's use of φάλλοι and verbal insults, without exploring possible linguistic or performative analogues.

¹⁷ Platter 2007:37; Griffith 1998.

actions of a given character resonated with different classes of citizens.¹⁸ Could the changeable and transformative nature of a given comic hero have thus allowed the poet to test or challenge the stability and aspirations of the Athenian polity itself? And in a Dionysian context, would Old Comedy's raucous appropriation of the festival's ritual and civic themes serve to ratify, or alternatively undermine, *polis* religion?¹⁹ Such questions cannot of course be settled by examining a single play. Even so, I suggest that *Birds* provides a great deal of useful material for further assessment of whether Old Comedy's employment of hymns, prayers and other ritually related actions or expressions enhances our appreciation of its connection to festival rituals, as well as ways in which it interplays with the festival's varied audience.

As a starting point for this inquiry, I first examine *Birds*' use of hymnic language as a means of addressing, portraying or referring to the gods, including in the context of its final wedding scene. Where appropriate, I take note of how such language resonates with the Great Dionysia's surrounding ritual and civic ceremonies. Finally, I examine how and why from start to finish the play is laced with sacrificial language and themes. Taken as a whole, I will suggest that the creative transformations and shifts seen in *Birds* between and among men, animals and gods are built on linguistic and performative ties to Greek religion; and that an enhanced focus on such links within the Great Dionysian context does indeed shed light on the nature and purpose of Aristophanes' theatrical gloss on the festival's cultic as well as civic rituals.

1. Hymnic language and themes

Old Comedy turns out to be a uniquely useful source for analysis of linguistic varieties, or 'registers', in Attic Greek.²⁰ Religious language²¹ is one such

¹⁸ Nelson 2014:122, noting that Old Comedy elicits diverse responses from different audience members as well as 'different, and even opposed, responses within a single spectator'.

¹⁹ Straus 2011, arguing that *Clouds* validated *polis* religion over against the 'new thinking' represented by Socrates.

²⁰ Willi 2003:2.

²¹ I use the term 'religious language' in a broad sense. This is almost a necessity, as even definitions of 'Greek religion' are elusive. Thus Pulleyn 1997 never defines the term, even though 'Prayer in Greek Religion' is the title of his monograph. Burkert 1985:7-8 uses as a general formulation that religion is 'a supra-personal system of communication' reflected in both ritual and myth. In this article 'religious language' simply means that which is used for purposes of such communication. I also use the term 'god' in a broad sense. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine closely

variety, and within the general breadth of religious language hymns and prayers stand out as the two most important.²² Moreover, hymns and prayers are fairly analysed as distinct registers, given their use in distinct situations.²³ As relevant here, I examine hymns in the context of the *Birds*' parabases and wedding songs, and its prayers within the framework of its sacrificial themes. In this section, I therefore first take note of the chorus' entrance in its festival context, and then discuss the parabases and certain other texts to identify their hymnic character in an effort to discern how

the Greek understanding of the gods; but it is noteworthy that Burkert 1985:118 finds it 'quite impossible to write the history of a single god' because any god's 'distinctive personality' is subject to four variables: its local cult, divine name, myths, and iconography. For my purposes, any gods of *Birds* likewise have no fixed nature, thus yielding to the poet's freedom to deify both his comic hero and the birds.

²² Willi 2003:8, 13-15. To be sure, hymns and prayers have the 'partial[ly] overlap[ping]' functions of supplication and praise of the gods (15; emphasis omitted). Nevertheless, by examination of their respective forms of invocation, their use of epithets, their use of speech-act verbs ('to pray' or 'to sing'), syntax, and their argument structure, one can arrive at workable classifications. For example, as Pulleyn 1997:43-55 notes, 'hymns were of their essence musical and prayers were not', thus distinguishing the speech-act of prayers from the modality of their performance in hymns. And Devlin 1994:3 observes that both hymns and prayers have 'an essentially tripartite structure ..., the use of an opening invocation which may be elaborated with descriptive, possibly flattering epithets, and many rhetorical devices.' Thus while '[t]he essential elements [of a prayer] are the petition and the relative status of mortal suppliant and divine supplicand ..., [t]he essence of a hymn ... is celebration and flattery of a god, which may or may not culminate in a petition.'

²³ Other religious registers might include epithets, invective and aischrology. At the same time, oaths and expressions such as $\nu\eta\ \Delta\acute{\iota}\alpha$ or $\tilde{\omega}\ \text{Ze}\tilde{\upsilon}$ might not, strictly speaking, form a separate ritual or religious register even though they have cultic overtones. This may be because in the comedic setting they seem to have a reduced impact much in the way the overly casual use of 'goddamn' now does in Western culture, having lost for many the Third Commandment's weight of taking the Lord's name in vain. While it is not possible to project backwards and gauge with any precision the impact such exclamations had in fifth-century Athens, it is at least worth noting that *Birds* is laced with oaths sworn to a wide range of deities or other personages: *Zeus* (11, 130, 135, 176, 269, 275, 386, 461, 470, 638, 661, 667, 673, 801, 954, 1015, 1017, 1148, 1210, 1216, 1220, 1237, 1308, 1349, 1358, 1371, 1396, 1422, 1427, 1433, 1462, 1632, 1651, 1668, 1680); *Dionysus* (171, 501, 1370); *Poseidon* (287, 294, 1131, 1614); *Apollo* (263, 438, 468, 480); *Earth, Snares, Gins and Nets* (194); *Demeter* (516); *Heracles* (814, 858, 1129, 1391); *'Gods'* (150, 997, 1026, 1166).

they build on established ritual forms while also expanding their scope in the exercise of comic freedom.

First parabasis: the Ornithogony

The Great Dionysia commenced with a symbolic re-enactment of the mythical return of Dionysus to Athens, whose inhabitants he had smitten with a plague affecting their genitals in punishment for initially having rejected him.²⁴ The god's statue was first removed from its regular place in the temple of Dionysus to the outskirts of the city and then transported back to the city in a torchlight procession accompanied by hymns – the εἰσαγωγή ἀπὸ τῆς ἐσχάρας – where it was placed in the Theatre of Dionysus for the duration of the festival. Other rites followed, including a second procession, the πομπή, leading to the sacrifice of a bull to purify the theatre, other sacrifices in the temple precincts and a night-time revel, or κῶμος.²⁵

As relevant here, the processional entrance onto the stage of the elaborately costumed Bird Chorus²⁶ therefore had an immediate analogue in the preceding torchlight, statue-bearing ceremony that opened the festival and in the πομπή thereafter. Inasmuch as those events were characterised by costumes and hymns, the Bird Chorus' ensuing songs would thus have been in harmony with the overall ritual setting and thereby themselves would have served as a form of cultic celebration. Consistent with this analysis, linguistic examination of the first parabasis²⁷ reveals a number of factors evidencing its character as a religious hymn.²⁸

First, the parabasis opens with the invocational words ὦ φίλη, ὦ ξουθή, ὦ φίλτατον ὀρνέων ('ah darling warbler, ah dearest of birds', *Av.* 676-77).

²⁴ See Σ *Ar. Ach.* 243.

²⁵ Pickard-Cambridge 1968:60-63; Sourvinou-Inwood 2003:69-73.

²⁶ Rothwell 2007:8. Compton-Engle 2015:117 notes that 'the role of the *chorēgos* as sponsor of the chorus adds an agonistic, status-vying element to the dynamics of costume' in that by virtue of his wealth and status the *chorēgos* had 'a self-promotional interest in making his chorus' costumes impressive.' It is worth contemplating the scope of the resulting spectacle in this play – a procession of four specialised birds followed by a Chorus of twenty-four more, each identified as a specific type and distinctively costumed accordingly, thereby fully reflecting the 'birds of every feather' summoned by Tereus. See *Av.* 229, 268-304; Dunbar 1995: 242-56.

²⁷ The parabasis as a whole runs from 676-800 and includes both hymnic passages and direct addresses to the audience.

²⁸ Individual linguistic factors need not be conclusive by themselves, since collectively they provide strong evidence as to the passage's nature.

Hymns often open with such a form of invocation, typically to a deity.²⁹ Although Tereus' mate Procne is invoked in her avian form as ἀηδών ('nightingale'), she is, in fact, a semi-divine figure from myth.³⁰ Beyond the invocation to Procne, moreover, there is an invocation to the Muse in the parabasis' ode (*Av.* 737). And both the ode and the antode use relative clauses following the vocative, an important syntactical characteristic of hymns.³¹

Second, the text continues with the redoubled summons ἦλθεσ ἦλθεσ ('come here, come here', *Av.* 679) language common to cletic hymns.³² Dunbar also suggests that this line reflects the ithyphallic metre of the φαλλικά.³³ As such, the metre was particularly appropriate to the Dionysian surroundings of the performance.

Third, the parabasis contains numerous divine epithets, another important hymnic element:³⁴ Ἐρεβός τε μέλαν, Τάρταρος εὐρύς, Ἔρωσ ὁ ποθεινός ... περύγοιν χρυσαῖν, Χάει περόεντι, μαντιῆος Ἀπόλλων, Μοῦσα λοχμαία ('black Erebus and broad Tartarus, Eros the seductive ... with wings of gold, winged Chaos, prophetic Apollo, bosky Muse').³⁵ As a general matter, moreover, hymns are characterised not only by a great number of epithets, but also by their 'inventive range'.³⁶ The multiple epithets in *Birds* are not only inventive but often have resonance within the play by means

²⁹ As Devlin 1994:17 notes, invocation in the form 'ὦ ____' is 'intended primarily to secure the attention of the right god. Care is taken to identify him correctly even if his name is not known.' In the latter instance, suppliants use the "opt-out" formula ("whatever is pleasing for you to be called") (346 n. 33). 'The god's name may be qualified, and is sometimes replaced, by one or more epithets, substantives in apposition, or participles. These may refer to the god's sphere of influence or activity, to his parentage or relationship to the suppliant, to places associated with his cult, or, rarely, to his personal appearance. Another device for expanding the invocation is the relative clause, which adds a description of some aspect of the god's power, a favoured cult site, his relationship to the suppliant, or his whereabouts' (17).

³⁰ It is relevant here that Tereus and Procne have cult associations with Athens; Burkert 1983:182. And as Buxton 1994:34-35 notes, comedy blends the 'time of myth' with then-contemporary reality.

³¹ Willi 2003:36; see *Av.* 737-52, 769-84.

³² See e.g. *Sapph. fr.* 1 Lobel-Page; *Hom. Il.* 5.115-20; cf. *Pax* 774-95. See generally Boychenko 2017:247-48; Parker 1997:6-10, 276-8; Page 1955:16-17.

³³ Dunbar 1995:426; cf. *Ach.* 241-79.

³⁴ Willi 2003:18-23; see e.g. *h. Cer.* 1; *h. Ven.* 1; and especially *h. Mart.* 1-6; *Alc. fr.* 304 Lobel-Page; cf. Page 1955:261-65; *Anac. fr.* 348.1-3 Page 1962:177.

³⁵ *Av.* 693, 696, 698, 722, 737.

³⁶ Willi 2003:21-22.

of avian references: *Apollo* (Saviour, 61; Golden-Haired, 216-17; Lord, 295; Healer, 584; Swan of Python and Delos, 869); *Zeus* (King, 223, 568; Almighty, 667; High-Enthroned, 1731); *Poseidon* (Lord of the Seastork, 868); *Artemis* (Curlew, 871); *Athena* (Guardian, 828); *Hera* (Olympian, 1731; Blessed, 1741); *Iris* (Swift, 1203-4); *Eros* (Seductive, 696; Golden-Winged, 697, 1737; Flourishing, 1737); *Chaos* (Winged, 697); *Erebus* (Black, 693); *Night* (Black-Winged, 695); *Cupid* (Golden-Winged, 574); *Muse* (Thicket-Dwelling, 736).

Fourth, from a vocabulary perspective, the language of the parabasis is clearly that of the musical hymn. While prayers generally use self-referential verbs such as εὔχομαι, ἀράομαι, λίσσομαι, ἄντομαι or ἱκετεύω (pray, invoke, entreat, approach, beseech), hymns, in contrast, typically use the verbs ὑμνέω, κλείω, μέλω or ᾄδω (hymn, celebrate, sing, chant), as well as register-specific terms such as νόμος. Here the Chorus begins the parabasis by addressing Procne as πάντων ζύννομε τῶν ἐμῶν ὕμνων ('songmate of all my hymns', *Av.* 677-78;), thus employing what is perhaps the principal hymnic noun. 'Music was inseparable from ancient cult'³⁷ and in this same initial passage, the Chorus refers to the αὐλός that would accompany the song (*Av.* 683). Again, both in the ode and the antode, the Chorus uses multiple 'song' words from the hymnic vocabulary,³⁸ also including a reference to the dancing, χορεύματα, that often accompanied the singing of hymns (*Av.* 746).³⁹

Fifth, the essence of the parabasis is sung glory and praise, with Pan, Cybele and Apollo – as well as the divine birds themselves – its objects; and glorification of the gods is, of course, very much a core purpose of hymns.⁴⁰

Finally, structural and thematic similarities between the first parabasis and Hesiod's admittedly hymnic *Theogony* are themselves evidence of the parabasis' ritual character. As a threshold matter, the parabasis invokes the Muse, as did *Theogony*. One of *Theogony's* central motifs is the formation of the cosmos and there is strong overlap among the primal beings: Chaos, Air,

³⁷ Furley and Bremer 2001:35. See e.g. Pind. *Ol.* 2.1 and 7.11-14.

³⁸ *Av.* 745, 749, 751, 783: νόμους, μελέων, ᾠδάν and μέλος.

³⁹ See Bremer 1981:197-98; Bowie 1993:147. Moreover, by thus 'comment[ing] self-referentially on their own performance as dancers', the Bird Chorus 'assume[s] a ritual posture which functions as a link between the cultic reality of the City Dionysia and the imaginary religious world' of the play (Henrichs 1995:59). But for a much narrower view, see Parker 1997:13: the parabasis is nothing more than 'a *jeu d'esprit*, a musical set-piece, in the same genre as the Frogs' Boating Song – and Rossini's Cats' Duet.

⁴⁰ Pulleyn 1997:46-47, 49-51, also noting that hymns may be offered simply for the gods' delight, or to provide them with τιμή (albeit in the hope of generating χάρις).

Earth, Erebus, Sky, Night, Ocean, Cronos, Dike, Eros and the Olympian gods – named in both texts.⁴¹ These latter passages thus present the play's alternative cosmogony, an Ornithogony as it were.⁴² Moreover, by making Night one of the first generation of beings rather than (as in Hesiod) a second-generation being, as well as by adding the 'Wind-Egg' from which Eros is hatched, Aristophanes may be reflecting post-Hesiodic cosmogonies such as those attributed to Musaeus, Epimenides, Pherecydes of Syros or Akousilaos and/or those generally described as 'Orphic'.⁴³

Finally, another of *Theogony's* 'central theme[s]' concerns '[t]he use of force in the constitution of the universe';⁴⁴ here *Birds'* intertextual links to Hesiod hymnically set the stage for the play's *own* version of the Gigantomachy,⁴⁵ where Zeus' victories in that battle will be reversed when Peisetauros obtains the κεραινός in the play's Exodos. The Ornithogony thus frames the birds' hoped-for return to dominion in the familiar language of divine genealogies.⁴⁶ The cosmos as portrayed in this manner is returned to the Golden Age and therefore to a 'stage before [Zeus] usurpation'.⁴⁷

The Ornithogony thus, arguably, partakes in a larger theogonic genre, not limited to Hesiod, by creating its own alternative and inventive cosmology.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Compare Hes. *Theog.* 116-38 with *Av.* 693-702.

⁴² Tsoumpra 2013:206-7; Dunbar 1995:428; Rogers 1906:92. Cosmogonies of this sort are part of a 'traditional genre with a long history before Hesiod', including Babylonian cosmogonic myths that may have influenced the Greeks. See West 1966:14; Dunbar 1995:438.

⁴³ Bremmer 2008:7-16; Hubbard 1997:32; Dunbar 1995:438-43; West 1983:48-50, 103-7, 111-12, 201 and n. 81; Kirk, Raven and Schofield 1983:17-22, 26-29 and nos. 25, 27 and 28; Pollard 1948:373-76; Rogers 1906:92-93.

⁴⁴ Buxton 1994:149.

⁴⁵ See *Av.* 553, 823-25, 1246-52.

⁴⁶ It would be going too far to suggest that the Ornithogony does not at the same time diminish the grandeur of the myths. Thus while Rogers 1906:90 finds 'no trace of any caricature', comedy hardly spoke univocally and its licence to speak both reverently and irreverently is perhaps the essence of its power. See e.g. Silk 2000:119, noting the 'mobility' as well as 'stability' in Aristophanes' style.

⁴⁷ Bowie 1993:159. As discussed below, rather than remain in that ancient realm the play stages its *own* succession myth, whereby Zeus himself is supplanted.

⁴⁸ Dover therefore errs in his view (1972:30) that the 'gods [of the *Birds*] are treated and portrayed not as the august beings worshipped in hymns and processions to temples, but as Pucks and Rumpelstiltskins drawn from the nursery-stories of an unusually sophisticated, confident and irreverent nursery.' Cf. Pascal 1911:5: 'gli dèi sono materia di riso per il poeta, non oggetto di venerazione.'). Similarly Nilsson 1969:77 takes the unsupportable position that 'no one who has an atom of real belief treats gods as Aristophanes does.'

And by means of newly crafted hymns Aristophanes has likewise drawn the Bird Chorus 'close to the other choruses who sing in religious celebration at the festival.'⁴⁹ As a result, he has narrowed any distance between theatre and ritual, effectively embedding the play as an element of the festival's dithyrambic and other hymns in praise of Dionysus.

Second parabasis: the Birds' ode and antode to themselves

Turning to the second parabasis, it too contains a range of ritual overtones, including vocabulary indicative of hymnic character. For example, when it praises itself in the ode, the Bird Chorus uses sacrificial terms – θνητοὶ πάντες θύσουσ' εὐκταίαις εὐχαῖς ('now shall all mortals sacrifice with pious prayers') – though not as an indication of action that the birds will take *vis-à-vis* the Olympian gods, but that mortals will take *vis-à-vis* the *birds* as gods (*Av.* 1059-60). In addition, the parabasis' antode makes use of the predicating relative clause (*Av.* 1089-90), 'the most distinct syntactic feature of hymns' in comparison to other lyric forms.⁵⁰ Further, the antode has a high ratio of instances where the article is omitted to those where it is used,⁵¹ another distinctive feature of hymns.⁵²

The second parabasis is, by definition, directed to the audience and in effect invites its members' participation in a collective process of discerning the play's boundaries and transgressions, in this case as they concern shifting relations among gods, men and beasts. As noted, a central conceit of the play is the alleged divinity of the birds. Therefore, although the second parabasis' ode may lack certain forms of hymnic invocation, its subject matter otherwise fits within the definition of hymns as a musical means of addressing or referring to the gods. As such, the birds may properly invoke themselves

⁴⁹ Goldhill 1991:197.

⁵⁰ Willi 2003:37; see also Devlin 1994:17, making the same point, but not cited by Willi.

⁵¹ Willi 2003:36 (a ratio of 10:1 within just 14 lines of text).

⁵² Willi 2003:37. There can, of course, be room for disagreement whether a given passage is hymnic or not. For example, notwithstanding the factors noted above, Willi describes the ode and antode of the second parabasis as 'non-hymnic choral passages', presumably because they do not fit his criterion of directly addressing deities (35-37). Nevertheless, he recognises the passages as 'para-hymnic' (36). Dunbar 1995:578, more strongly, describes these verses as having 'many features of hymn style corresponding to [their] celebratory theme'. By comparison, see Cinesias' petition for wings in non-hymnic verse crafted in parody of 'New Dithyramb' (*Av.* 1373-1409); cf. Wellenbach 2015:214-23; see Dunbar 1995:661-62 for a metrical analysis of the passage.

without losing hymnic register; and from a substantive point of view, the second parabasis thereby further supports the argument that the play reflects an imaginative approach to and interaction with the festival's ritual and worship.

Exodos/the wedding hymn

The play culminates in song and feast and shouts of victory.⁵³ Here the heart of the celebration is Peisetairus' complete dominance over the birds along with his ascendance to godlike status by means of his wedding to Zeus' throne attendant, Basileia.⁵⁴ Again, on the analytical framework set forth above, the elaborate choral sections comprising these events have a number of key hymnic hallmarks, giving ritual import to this scene as well.

First, the nuptial songs begin with the typical invocative $\tilde{\omega}$, in this instance to the semi-divine wedding itself, followed immediately by a call to welcome the goddess-bride (*Av.* 1725-30).⁵⁵ The songs continue with several express invocations to Hymen as god of marriage, and Eros the god of love.⁵⁶ They end with a paean and a victory cry, both ritual in nature (*Av.* 1763-65).⁵⁷ The Bird Chorus also praises Zeus' thunderbolt itself (*Av.* 1748-54).⁵⁸ The thunderbolt may be taken metonymically for Zeus or his power; thus the Chorus' praise has a hymnic register in this regard as well (*Av.* 764). And the final $\tilde{\omega}$ invocation is to Peisetairus himself as a divinity – and not just any divinity, but one superseding Zeus, $\delta\alpha\iota\mu\acute{o}\nu\omega\nu \acute{\upsilon}\pi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\tau\alpha\tau\epsilon$ (*Av.* 1765).

Second, the Chorus expressly uses words marking their song as a form of hymn, exhorting those gathered to welcome the couple $\acute{\upsilon}\mu\epsilon\nu\alpha\acute{\iota}\omicron\iota\varsigma \kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}$

⁵³ As do other comedies in one respect or another, e.g. *Ach.* 1227-34; *Eq.* 1319-20; and *Pax* 1332-57. See also Meineck 2013:358, noting how such performative events served 'to incorporate [the] audience within the action of the play'.

⁵⁴ On what Dunbar 1995:703 calls the 'fruitless scholars' debate' as to who Basileia is, see Anderson and Dix 2007; Segal 2001:97; Bowie 1993:164-65; and Sheppard 1909.

⁵⁵ The Chorus at 1720 also uses what Dunbar 1995:753 speculates may be a blend of military injunctions with 'ritual shout[s] at wedding processions to make way for the bridal procession.'

⁵⁶ *Av.* 1735-36, 1742-43, 1754. Invocations of Eros or Hymen are characteristic of wedding songs and give them a ritual content. See Furley and Bremer 2001:32.

⁵⁷ With respect to the paean, see Dunbar 1995:769 and Pulleyn 1997:182-83; with respect to the victory cry see Pulleyn 1997:181.

⁵⁸ Dunbar 1995:762-63 describes these verses as 'the most elevated lyric, with piled-up epithets and poetic forms' in a manner 'characteristic of hymns, when the same divine being is addressed under three aspects.'

νυμφιδίοισι ... ὦδαῖς ('with wedding and bridal songs', *Av.* 1728-29). Peisetairus in response recognises the songs as such: Ἐχάρην ὕμνοισ, ἐχάρην ὦδαῖς ('I'm pleased by your chants, pleased by your songs', *Av.* 1743).

Third, the song employs divine epithets appropriate to the occasion – Ἥρα Ὀλυμπία, ὁ ἀμφιθαλῆς Ἔρως χρυσοπτερος, εὐδαίμονος Ἥρας ('Olympian Hera, and blooming Eros of the golden wings, and thriving Hera') – by which the protagonist's wedding is compared to that of Hera and Zeus with Eros as their attendant.⁵⁹

Finally, from a metrical point of view the phrasing of the songs, including 'nine uninterrupted long syllables ... expressing the solemn awe of the birds,' 'may be related to that found in some cult hymns.'⁶⁰

In sum, the play provides us throughout with multiple and varied forms of ritual praise that would undoubtedly have registered as such in the midst of the Great Dionysia. As an initial response to the question raised at the outset of this article, whether our appreciation of Old Comedy's interplay with the festival is enhanced by examining its ritual aspects, I suggest that by hymnically embedding the play within more solemn events of the festival Aristophanes opened a series of links to those ceremonies. And as further discussed in the next section, those connections were tightened by means of the pervasive sacrificial language and themes of the play, all giving weight to its comic critique of the city's civilised self-image in the midst of an expansive and brutal imperial war.

2. Sacrificial language and themes

Just as Aristophanes' wide-ranging use of hymns in *Birds* illustrates the complexity of the Greeks' festal interactions with their gods, so also his use of sacrificial language and themes expands our view of the role Old Comedy played in addressing possible tensions between the violence inherent in sacrificial practices and the Greeks' understanding of the proper relation-

⁵⁹ *Av.* 1731, 1737-38, 1741. Sheppard 1909:533 and Pascal 1911:100 read the marriage of Peisetairus and Basileia as a parody of the ritualistic wedding of Dionysus to the Βασίλιννα at the Anthesteria, the former also pointing out a possible verbal resonance with her name as used by the Triballian in his comment at line 1678, μεγάλη βασιλιναῦ ὄρνιτο παραδίδωμι ('missy Princessy I hand over birdie'). For a description of the wedding ritual at the Anthesteria, see Pickard-Cambridge 1968:11. See also Craik 1987, finding several intertextual references in *Av.* to the *Chytroi* ('cooking pots') ritual on the Anthesteria's third day. cf. *Ran.* 218 (τοῖς ἱεροῖσι Χύτροισι, 'on Holy Pot Day').

⁶⁰ Dunbar 1995:753.

ships among men, beasts and gods, including questions as to the stability of Athens' self-image as a city distanced from savagery.

The search for a carefree land

Sacrificial language and themes appear at the very outset of the play. The Athenian travellers, in their search for a τόπος ἀπράγμων ('a peaceable place'), come armed with certain implements of a sacrificial nature, most of them cooking-related. First, they have a κανοῦν, a wicker basket often used to carry sacrificial utensils; second, a κύτρα, a bowl or kettle used for boiling; third, μυρρίναι, branches that are either 'carried by worshippers in processions to sacrificial altars' or formed into 'garlands worn at sacrifices'; and fourth, an ὀβελίσκος, used to skewer the sacrificial meat.⁶¹ Whether these items included fire carried from the sacred hearth of Athens, or were otherwise to be used in some ritual to honour the gods of the τόπος ἀπράγμων sought by the travellers is not key:⁶² what matters is the signalling that some sort of sacrifice may be afoot.

There is no specific mention of the traditional jar holding lustral water, but Peisetairus does call for water to be poured on his hands before addressing the bird assembly (*Av.* 464), an action consistent with civic purification ceremonies.⁶³ Moreover, at the start of the sacrificial ritual he likewise calls for the servants to provide him with a χέρνυψ (*Av.* 849), a bowl used for purposes of ritual hand washing.⁶⁴ The men also carry two τρύβλια and an ὀξύβαφον (*Av.* 361). The latter have no particular significance in ritual, but various of the utensils not only do double duty in the 'battle' with the birds,⁶⁵ but are also rich food for puns about the ritual spits, bowls and myrtle.⁶⁶

The grim and disruptive nature of Peisetairus' sacrificial ritual is early foreshadowed by the appearance of Tereus, a character of myth⁶⁷ and

⁶¹ Dunbar 1995:150-51, 274-75; Zaidman and Pantel 1992:33; Burkert 1985:93; cf. *Ach.* 244-467 (basket and cakes); *Thesm.* 447-48 (myrtle garlands); *Vesp.* 860-62 (fire and myrtle wreaths); *Pax* 947-49 (basket, garland and knife).

⁶² Compare Dunbar 1995:150-51 with Habash 1994:93 and with Graham 1964:25.

⁶³ Parker 1983:20.

⁶⁴ Dunbar 1995:502.

⁶⁵ *Av.* 356, 359, 361, 386-88.

⁶⁶ Henderson 1975:123, 134-35, 143.

⁶⁷ See Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.14.8 (Simpson 1976) for the outlines of the Tereus myth; for discussions concerning the play's use of it, see generally Pollard 1948; Arrowsmith 1973; Pozzi 1986; Dobrov 1993; Tsoumpira 2013. Note also in the context of the utensils mentioned above that other myths concerning 'gruesome

tragedy⁶⁸ whose defining trait is that of a cannibal, having consumed his own son Itys (albeit unwittingly). As such, he became a transgressor of the Hesiodic distinction between men and beasts.⁶⁹

τόνδε γὰρ ἀνθρώποισι νόμον διέταξε Κρονίων,
ἰχθύσι μὲν καὶ θηροῖ καὶ οἰωνοῖς πετεηνοῖς
ἔσθειν ἀλλήλους, ἐπεὶ οὐ δίκη ἐστὶ μετ' αὐτοῖς·
ἀνθρώποισι δ' ἔδωκε δίκην, ἣ πολλὸν ἀρίστη
γίνεται·

Here is the law, as Zeus established it for human beings; as for fish, and wild animals, and the flying birds, they feed on each other, since there is no idea of justice among them; but to men he gave justice, and she in the end is proved the best thing they have.'
(Hes. *Op.* 276-80)

The gods' punishment of Tereus' transgression fitted his crime when he was transformed into a bird, a creature viewed with particular disgust

banquets' often refer both to kettles and to spits as part of a 'partially boiling and partially roasting' motif. Burkert 1983:89 n. 29; Detienne 1979:69-70.

⁶⁸ Soph. *fr.* 581-95 Radt. Kotini 2005:191, 197 takes a contrary view to mine of the relevance of the myth or the tragedy to *Birds*, arguing that the 'only' pertinent fact is that Tereus was transformed into a bird, such that his 'bird nature ... is all he now has in the play.' But Sophocles' eponymous tragedy might well have been fresh in the audience's mind, and although we only have fragments of the work, it is not fanciful to assume that the basic plot was consistent with core aspects of the myth. See Arist. *Poet.* 1253b 22-24: τοὺς μὲν οὖν παρελημμένους μύθους λύειν οὐκ ἔστιν ('it is not possible to undo the traditional stories'); see e.g. Hom. *Od.* 19.518-23; Sapph. *fr.* 135 Lobel-Page; Aesch. *Ag.* 1140-49; Ar. *fr.* 461 Kock = 478 Henderson 2000-07: ἐγευσάμην χορδῆς ὁ δύστηνος τέκνων ('I've tasted – a wretch! – the guts of my own children'); cf. Ov. *Met.* 6.587-600, 645-46.

⁶⁹ See Bonnechère 1994:230. Note also that the play opens with the word ὀρθὴν ('straight'), suggestive of the contrast between the crooked and the straight repeated throughout *Op.*, e.g. at 7, 9, 36, 219, 221, 224, 230, 250, 262, 264-65. In Hesiod the parallel contrasts to the crooked and the straight are between ὕβρις and δίκη; and such contrasts are likewise reflected in a number of works from the Archaic period. See e.g. Sol. *fr.* 36; Thgn. 53-68. One relevant characteristic of crooked rulers is that they 'consume' the oppressed by taking bribes to pervert justice; thus Hesiod describes them as δωροφάγοι ('bribe-eaters', *Op.* 39, 221, 264). Again, this Hesiodic theme finds resonance in the choral ode warning of the πανοῦργον ἐγγλωττογαστόρων γένος ('the wicked race of Thrive-by-Tongues', *Av.* 1695), which itself calls to mind Tereus' severance of Philomela's tongue.

because of its combined incestuous and cannibalistic eating habits.⁷⁰ Nor did Aristophanes leave it at that, since Tereus' fall from grace, as it were, likewise took hold of his wife Procne who, along with her raped and mutilated sister Philomela, foisted the cannibalism on Tereus by way of revenge, thereby giving rise to their own avian transformations.⁷¹ Given the Hesiodic assumption that civilisation reflects a kind of upward trend in human progress, moving beyond the cannibalistic savagery of animals towards cultural and institutional stability,⁷² I suggest that Aristophanes' initial character choices lay the groundwork for a challenge to that assumption by importing a myth rife with savagery. And as discussed in the following section, that challenge bears fruit by way of Peisetairus' inversion of the city-founding sacrifice ritual.

The city-founding sacrifice

After taking note of the sacrificial utensils carried out of the city by the Athenian travellers, Aristophanes introduced the play's sacrificial themes more explicitly by way of Peisetairus' arguments to the birds in favour of the proposed rebellion against Zeus. As he explains to Tereus, by constructing a *polis*-barrier between men and gods the birds can 'starve' the gods out 'whenever men sacrifice to the gods' by denying to the gods τῶν μηρίων

⁷⁰ Auger 1979:84: 'Pour toute la tradition grecque, les oiseaux, entre tous les animaux, mettent en pratique les excès du monde sauvage, l'inceste et le cannibalisme.' And the hoopoe, into which Tereus was transformed, was a particularly nasty creature: *obscena alias pastu avis* ('a bird that feeds on any kind of filth', Plin. *NH* 10.44); see also Forbes Irving 1990:103.

⁷¹ Here again I disagree with Kotini 2005:205, who argues that Procne's only relevance to the play lies in her nightingale/songbird form as the limit of her nameless appearance, which thus 'extinguishes her mythological profile'. Such a view not only shares the defects discussed above concerning Kotini's analysis of Tereus, but also makes no sense of Tereus' reference to their cannibalised son Itys in his song to Procne (*Av.* 212). That Tereus was a barbarian from the wilds of Thrace, who inserted himself into the heart of Athens by marrying one of its princesses (*Soph. fr.* 583 and 587 Radt), is also relevant to the play's theme of cannibalism, a practice deemed wholly 'foreign' to Athens; Bonnechère 1994:239-40; Henrichs 1981:233; see also Burkert 1983:179-84. Indeed, the myths concerning Dionysus that also trace *his* origins to Thrace (*Apollod. Bibl.* 3.5.1-2; Simpson 1976), further confirm the import of Tereus' presence in the play, given its performance at Athens' Great Dionysia.

⁷² Rothwell 2007:85, but noting (90) that the Cynic Diogenes 'insisted on the superiority of animals and felt that Prometheus' introduction of civilised life was disastrous for humanity.'

τὴν κνῖσαν ('the aroma of the thigh bones', *Av.* 180-193).⁷³ To seal the deal, he urges the Bird Chorus to require men to make any future sacrifices *not* to the Olympians, but to the birds (*Av.* 561-69). Here again, to the extent that the Greek sacrificial system was designed to reflect a reconciled relationship between the human and the divine by maintaining an ordered hierarchy of beast/man/god, the hierarchy is not so much disordered as reversed.

Peisetairus begins implementation of his great plan by founding Cloud-cuckooland. To what extent did Aristophanes import and adopt the festival's surrounding rituals in portraying this event? The short answer is, quite a bit! The play's city-founding rituals seem to begin seriously enough when, prior to dispatching his bird-troops to commence construction, Peisetairus pauses to consecrate the work:

ἐγὼ δ' ἵνα θύσω τοῖσι καινοῖσιν θεοῖς,
τὸν ἱερέα πέμψοντα τὴν πομπὴν καλῶ.
παῖ παῖ, τὸ κανοῦν αἴρεσθε καὶ τὴν χέρνιβα.

As for me, I'd better sacrifice to the new gods, so I'll invite the priest
to organize the procession. Boy! Boy! You boys pick up the basket
and the holy water.
(*Av.* 848-50)

His summons is followed by the Bird Chorus' song proposing initial appeasement of the gods by means of a sacrifice – προβάτιόν τι θύειν ('by sacrificing a wee sheep', 855-56). The requisite Priest arrives and commences his prayer:

εὔχεσθε τῇ Ἑστία τῇ ὄρνιθειῶ καὶ τῶ
ἰκτίνῳ τῶ ἐστιούχῳ καὶ ὄρνισιν Ὀλυμπίοις καὶ Ὀλυμπίησι
πᾶσι καὶ πάσησιν.

all pray to Hestia of the Birds, to Kite their Hearthkeeper, to the
Olympian birds and birdesses each and all.
(*Av.* 865-67)

⁷³ See also 1514-24, where this 'Melian' strategy reportedly worked. As Romer 1994:352 points out, the birds' 'Melian fast' 'strip[s] the benefits of sacrifice from the gods [in] a naked act of power and aggression.'

And next, Peisetairus invokes a deity: ὦ Σουνιέρακε, χαῖρ', ἄναξ Πελαργικέ ('Hail, Hawk of Sunium, Lord of the Seastork', *Av.* 868).⁷⁴

As a general matter, animal sacrifice⁷⁵ consisted of the selection of an appropriate victim, a πομπή led by a priest or other offeror, opening prayers, ablutions, an offering of 'first fruits' of grain, a call for ritual silence, slaughter, dismemberment, roasting and distribution.⁷⁶ These same elements are present as the faux city-founding proceeds:

First, the selected victim is said to be a 'little sheep'.⁷⁷

Second, Peisetairus calls for a Priest to begin the πομπή.⁷⁸

Third, initiating prayers are offered. Note that there are two relevant aspects to such prayers.

(1) From a formal point of view, Greek prayers are generally begun with some form of invocation, often but not exclusively 'with ὦ preceding the name of the divinity'.⁷⁹ Prayers that take the form εὔχεσθε plus the dative may have a more 'official' ring to them,⁸⁰ in any event εὔχομαι is the most commonly used term for all forms of prayers.⁸¹ Further, prayers often

⁷⁴ This coinage is a neologistic variation on an epithet of Poseidon; Henderson 2000:137 n. 82.

⁷⁵ While it is the case that sacrificial offerings were not limited to animals, but could include votive offerings that 'remained in [a] sanctuary, perceptible and tangible, after their presentation' (Van Straten 1981:69; Burkert 1985:92-95), it was animal sacrifice that dominated as 'the most central and ubiquitous rite of Greek religion' (Henrichs 2000:174).

⁷⁶ Zaidman and Pantel 1992:35-36; Dunbar 1995:541; Habash 1994:102-3. See also Burkert 1985:99, noting that the πομπή was 'the fundamental medium of group formation' in the *polis*.

⁷⁷ The offering is comically modest in contrast to the asserted grandness of the city, but it is still consistent with the fixed requirement that sacrifices be of domesticated animals. See Detienne 1989:8-9; Sourvinou-Inwood 2003:86; cf. *Lev.* 1:2 (specifying domesticated animals in the context of Hebrew sacrificial offerings).

⁷⁸ Thus also resonating with the festival's opening processions discussed above.

⁷⁹ Willi 2003:16. Invocations employ certain characteristic verbs summoning the god to hear or appear, e.g. κλῦθι or ἐλθέ. Pulleyn 1997:134-44; Porta 1999:174-75. Such language also appears in cletic hymns; Boychenko 2017:248, noting the 'blurring' that can be seen, in this regard, between prayers and hymns.

⁸⁰ Willi 2003:16-17.

⁸¹ Willi 2003:24; see also Pulleyn 1997:59-64, also noting the use in prayers of ἀράομαι, λίσσομαι and ἱκετεύω. As to the moods of prayer, it is the imperative that prevails, followed in frequency by the optative and then the infinitive; Pulleyn 1997:150-51, noting the same relative frequency in Aristophanes as in Homer. And as to aspect, the aorist prevails over the present in all moods; Pulleyn 1997:154 and App. 2 ('Aspect in Greek Prayers').

include a divine epithet characterising and/or localising the divinity as part of the invocation.⁸² Here both the Priest and Peisetairus employ such language.⁸³

(2) From a substantive point of view, the heart of a prayer for the Greeks would have been the 'argumentation'. This may take various forms evoking a sense of obligation on the part of the god, whether for past benefits rendered to him/her/it or in the expectation of future reverence.⁸⁴ Here, as well, the birds sing that the purpose of the city-founding sacrifice will be to seek the gods' χάρις (*Av.* 855), and the Priest thus asks for ὑγίεια καὶ σωτηρία ('health and security', *Av.* 878).⁸⁵

Fourth, Peisetairus asks for water to perform the ritual ablutions (*Av.* 849).

Fifth, in preparing for the actual slaughter, both Peisetairus and the Bird Chorus use θύω, the verb most commonly used to refer to the sacrificial event itself.⁸⁶ And it is notable that Peisetairus now solidifies the relationship described above between prayer and sacrifice by combining them: θύοντες εὐζώμεσθα ('as we sacrifice, let us pray', *Av.* 903).

⁸² Burkert 1985:74-75, 184; Willi 2003:20. Whether such epithets were seen as having magical properties, or were included simply 'to delight the god', is an open question; Pulleyn 1997:115.

⁸³ The inclusive form of address used by the Priest – ὄρνισιν Ὀλυμπίοις καὶ Ὀλυμπιῆσι πᾶσι καὶ πάσησιν – is also characteristic of general ritual practice, in that prayers and accompanying sacrifices were variously made to multiple gods, or to 'all the gods', or to 'all the gods but most of all to "x."'; Pulleyn 1997:108-110; Willi 2003:13; Porta 1999:166-67; Burkert 1985:182.

⁸⁴ See therefore the varieties *da-quia-dedi*; *da-quia-dedisti*; *da-quia-dedit*; *da-ut-dem*; *da-ut-dare-possim*; and *do-ut-des* laid out in Pulleyn 1997:xv, which itself builds on those in Bremer 1981. See also Porta 1999:157, 161-62, 180.

⁸⁵ In this context prayers do not stand alone; they are but one aspect of the sacrificial ritual. Thus there 'is rarely a ritual without prayer, and no important prayer without ritual: *litai* – *thysiai*, prayers – sacrifices is an ancient and fixed conjunction' (Burkert 1985:73); cf. Pulleyn 1997:40: 'The most normal context for a prayer is accompanying a sacrifice.' The link parallels the system of guest-host reciprocity; indeed, Pulleyn 1997:29 takes the view that 'the formulae of prayer and of ξενία are the same.' See also Versnel 1981b:36: It is not 'that the favors of the gods were ... for sale' so much as that 'the essence of χάρις is that the god is offered something pleasing' in the 'hope of reciprocal favor.' Cf. Pulleyn 1997:12-13; Burkert 1985:189; see also Furley and Bremer 2001:61-62.

⁸⁶ *Av.* 848, 856, 862, 903, 922, 1057, 1060. Zaidman and Pantel 1992:33; see generally Casabona 1966:69-154. Other verbs commonly used in a sacrificial context such as σφάζω ('slaughter') emphasise the particular method of slaughter itself; Casabona 1966:155-96.

Sixth, the ritual call for silence would be made at this point, whereby the person offering the sacrifice asks for ‘well-omened words’ just before the actual slaughter. And here Peisetairus does so, intoning εὐφημία ἴστω (‘auspicious speech please’, *Av.* 959).⁸⁷ In sum, Aristophanes has referred to all the essential elements of Greek sacrifice, thus forging a clear link to the festival’s other sacrificial events.

The civic ceremonies occurring in the theatre itself immediately before the presentation of the several plays also become relevant here.⁸⁸ These included presentation of tribute from Athens’ allies; honours given to citizens as well as to foreigners who had benefited the city; and the public presentation of the orphans of fallen soldiers to mark their own coming of age and entrance into military service for the city.⁸⁹

While the Great Dionysia was not the only festival on the calendar honouring Dionysus, it had a central importance to fifth-century Athens because its celebrations occurred distinctively in the presence of visitors from ‘the whole Hellenic world’.⁹⁰ The festival as a whole was thereby made ‘an effective advertisement of the wealth and power and public spirit of Athens, no less than of the artistic and literary leadership of her sons’.⁹¹ As such, the city-founding occurring on the stage would necessarily implicate and critique Athens’ own self-presentation.

It would therefore likely have come as an abrupt shift in focus when, despite all the preparations detailed above, the next step in the ritual – the actual animal slaughter – did not proceed smoothly. Instead, the sequence is

⁸⁷ See also Tsoumpra 2013:144-45, discussing the use of such words here and in other comedies. Other ‘standardised’ closing language in prayers would include words such as requests for ἀγαθά or ritual cries such as ἡ παιών. Cf. Willi 2003:45-47. The latter is also not uncommon in hymns, such as in the wedding hymn in *Av.* 1763. See Dunbar 1995:769; Pulleyn 1997:182-83.

⁸⁸ Pickard-Cambridge 1968:63.

⁸⁹ Pickard-Cambridge 1968:59. Goldhill 1990:102, 114 focuses on the pre-play civic ceremonies as a use of ‘the state festival to glorify the state,’ such that he views the Great Dionysia as ‘in the full sense of the expression a civic occasion’. He argues that while these events glorified the state, the ensuing tragedies and the comedies questioned the *polis*’ ‘self-image’ (102) by exposing its internal ‘conflicts and ambiguities’ (127); and thereby finds the resulting ‘interplay of norm and transgression’ to be ‘Dionysiac’, using the term in an abstracted sense to refer to Dionysus’ generalised character as ‘the divinity associated with illusion and change, paradox and ambiguity, release and transgression’ (127-29).

⁹⁰ Pickard-Cambridge 1968:58; Sourvinou-Inwood 2003:100-1. This was not the case with other festivals, such as the Lenaia.

⁹¹ Pickard-Cambridge 1968:58.

repeatedly interrupted.⁹² Even the Priest's presence in apparent response to Peisetairus' summons is quickly dispensed with.⁹³ Peisetairus thus ejects the Priest from the proceedings and says that he will perform the rite himself, telling the Priest to take his 'wreaths' with him (*Av.* 894; cf. 43). In the text following the Priest's abortive participation, the birds' language takes on, as noted above, a ritual register in their second song concerning the sacrifice, where they refer both to the sacrificial basket and bowl and to the meagerness of the victim itself, indicating that the only leftovers will be a 'beard and horns' after the birds have snatched their portion away.⁹⁴

It is worth asking at this point what the reaction of one or another element in the audience might have been, given that the fifth-century audience could not be characterised as having a 'homogeneous collective identity or response'.⁹⁵ I tend to think of our present-day 'celebrity roasts' as having perhaps some residual elements of Old Comedy, where crude and often personal or even humiliating comments seem to occur in the 'safe' space of an elevated dais and the targets are supposed to grin and bear it,

⁹² The birds' responding song at 851-58 (strophe) and 895-902 (antistrophe), concurring with Peisetairus' plan to mark the founding of Cloudcuckooland with sacrifice, therefore also partakes of the ritual's overtones, although in form it might almost be described as *hymnus interruptus*. While the birds begin a hymn in celebration, ὁμοροθῶ, συνθέλω, συμπαραινέσας ἔχω προσόδια μεγάλα σεμνὰ προσιέναι θεοῖσιν ('I am with you, I concur, I hereby endorse your advice to approach the gods with grand and solemn hymns', 851-54), the appearances of the Priest and Poet described herein interrupt both Peisetairus and the Chorus, such that the hymn cannot proceed.

⁹³ The absence of a priest, however, is also consistent with Greek religious practices. Sacrifices and the prayers accompanying them did not require a priest or other cultic 'official', but could be performed by any individual. Cf. Burkert 1985:95: 'Greek religion might almost be called a religion without priests.... The god in principle admits anyone ...' Riu 1999:251 seems not to realise this and therefore misinterprets the repeated 'interrupt[ions]' of Peisetairus' sacrificial proceedings as due to a failure to 'follow the regular procedure that requires a priest', an error that prevents him from recognising the play's imaginative variations on ritual themes. Whitman 1964:188 labels the sacrifices of the *Birds* as 'unholy sacrilege' and therefore likewise fails to recognise that Greek religion's non-credal nature and its absence of orthodoxy are among its defining aspects. See Finley 1985:xiv-xv.

⁹⁴ *Av.* 902, thus cross-referencing the birds' 'snatching' habits described in lines 518-19.

⁹⁵ Goldhill 1990:115; Nelson 2014:122.

taking no offence.⁹⁶ Imagine, in that light, the priest of Dionysus, who would literally have had a front row seat as he watched the metaphorical elimination of his job as either inefficacious or unnecessary. It is not that anyone was likely to have taken the jab in utter seriousness or been offended, of course, as much as it reflects what Paul Cartledge aptly calls the ‘seriously funny’ nature of Comedy.⁹⁷

Next on the scene after the Priest’s dismissal is a Poet, who assumes a Hesiodic mantle by purporting to speak with the voice of the Muses.⁹⁸ As a type of the divinely sanctioned singer he, too, functions here with ritual overtones, presenting his verse in the ‘dithyrambic tone’ characteristic of the festival’s recently sung hymns to Dionysus.⁹⁹ Yet although he claims to seek the gods’ favour for the city he, in fact, only asks things for *himself* – δὸς ἐμὴν – and is likewise ejected (*Av.* 929).¹⁰⁰ And again, one assumes that the poets and singers in the audience would have been big enough to enjoy a laugh at their own expense.

Then along comes the Oracle Monger, another cult-related personage.¹⁰¹ He asserts a role in the ceremonies when he piously upbraids Peisetairus: τὰ θεῖα μὴ φαύλως φέρε (‘don’t make light of religious matters’, *Av.* 961).¹⁰² But, as I have suggested, Peisetairus does not hesitate to frame ritual as he sees fit, and thus he crafts his *own* sacrifice-related oracle (*Av.* 984). His interchange with the Oracle Monger only further adds to Peisetairus’ recon-

⁹⁶ To be sure, not everyone is man enough to laugh at himself. See e.g. Donald Trump’s stone-faced reaction to President Obama’s acerbic comments at the 2011 White House Correspondents’ Dinner (available on YouTube).

⁹⁷ Cartledge 1998:6, urging future scholarship to take ‘full measure ... of the user-friendly Hellenic compound adjective σπουδαιογέλοιον’.

⁹⁸ *Av.* 905-10; cf. Hes. *Theog.* 22-34.

⁹⁹ Wellenbach 2015:224-28.

¹⁰⁰ Whether what the Poet offers is a prayer or a hymn is a purely definitional matter. Bremer 1981:193 posits that ‘[a] hymn is a sung prayer’; Devlin 1994:2 describes hymns as ‘songs of praise to the gods’; Porta 1999:195 defines them as ‘songs which praise a deity’; while Pulleyn 1997:43-55 makes the distinction that ‘hymns were of their essence musical and prayers were not.’

¹⁰¹ Zaidman and Pantel 1992:52 refer to *chrēsmologoi* as ‘freelance religious experts’.

¹⁰² His made-up oracles call for a sacrifice to Pandora (971). Although some commentators suggest that the Oracle Monger’s ‘Pandora’ is the goddess ‘Earth’ and thus distinct from Hesiod’s Pandora, there are good arguments that the two ‘Pandoras’ were linked in Athenian cult. See Romer 1997:72 nn. 40-41.

figuration of cultic structures,¹⁰³ and in short order the Oracle Monger suffers humiliation when he is, literally, kicked out (*Av.* 989-90).¹⁰⁴

The sacrifice of the dissident birds

Having supplanted the cult servants of the gods, Peisetairus' final step is to eject the gods' messenger Iris from the scene – but not before threatening her with rape (*Av.* 1253-55),¹⁰⁵ thus reprising the play's Tereusian themes of rape, mutilation, cannibalism and transformation. What ensues is that, having individualised the ritual by dispensing with any relevant cult personnel,¹⁰⁶ Peisetairus proceeds to sacrifice *neither* to the birds as 'new gods' *nor* to the Olympians as 'old gods'. Instead, abandoning the 'little sheep', Peisetairus starts roasting his fellow birds (*Av.* 1583)¹⁰⁷ in a sacrificial ritual that is both allelophagic and solipsistic. Thus, Peisetairus appropriates the fruits of the sacrifice to himself,¹⁰⁸ first by using the term κατεκόπησαν, which refers to the ritual dismemberment that a μάγειρος would perform,¹⁰⁹ and then stating that once so prepared the birds would become food for his own wedding feast (*Av.* 1688-89). Because the food resulting from animal sacrifices was normally conceived of as shared between god and man as offeree and offeror (the former enjoying the scent of the smoke, the

¹⁰³ As Silk 2000:221-55 explains, Aristophanes' comic heroes characteristically engage in such recreative transformations.

¹⁰⁴ Peisetairus also dispatches three 'secular' figures swiftly: the geometer Meton, a travelling inspector tasked with enforcing Athenian policies throughout the empire, and a seller of legal decrees (995-1055). While these figures are not integral to the city-founding sacrifice as such, their ejection further rounds out Peisetairus' serial dismantling of the city's stabilising structures.

¹⁰⁵ Tsoumpra 2013:210-12 analyses the threatened rape within the framework of the male-dominated power structure of Athens.

¹⁰⁶ Sfyroeras 1992:103 refers to this as a 'privatization' of ritual.

¹⁰⁷ The dissident birds seem to represent a second sacrifice. Thus Peisetairus first offers a τράγος ('goat', 1057), which is found to be καλά (1118). Even without express reference to all of the other ritual elements, the roasting of the birds has a clear sacrificial import, one reinforced in a choral passage immediately preceding that event by the otherwise cryptic image of the general Peisandrus (whose name thus approximates Peisetairus') sacrificing a camel (1556-64).

¹⁰⁸ Indeed, he takes the sacrifice indoors for completion (1056-57), thus preventing the gods from receiving the smoke that would otherwise be their due.

¹⁰⁹ Zaidman and Pantel 1992:35-36; Vernant 1989:39-41; Tsoumpra 2013:129-31; see also *Av.* 1637, where Peisetairus calls for the μάγειρος.

latter the meat¹¹⁰), here the tripartite relationship among god, man and beast is conflated when Peisetairus ‘distributes’ the roasted meat to himself.¹¹¹

I have my doubts that any *mageiros* in the audience would have taken umbrage at the casual way his ritual duties as butcher-cook-sacrificer were portrayed, or would have perceived a threat to his cash business of selling the meat and offal of slaughtered carcasses, but who knows? It is at least worth bearing in mind Detienne’s suggestion that ‘[p]olitical power cannot be exercised without sacrificial practice.’¹¹² As such, whether the civic task at hand involved the commencement of a military campaign, the assumption of political office, or similar occasions, ‘each must begin with a sacrifice followed by a meal.’¹¹³ And in that context, there was certainly something of a contemporary political edge in Peisetairus’ apparent dismantling of the system in favour of his own tyranny.¹¹⁴

Whether in sacrificing the dissidents Peisetairus is exhibiting predatory human characteristics he retained after being ‘winged’ by Tereus (*Av.* 649-55)¹¹⁵ (just as Tereus retained certain human characteristics after the gods transformed him into a bird)¹¹⁶ and is simply behaving the way people have long behaved towards birds, or whether he is exhibiting the cannibalistic nature of the bird that he has at least in part become, is less relevant for present purposes than what I suggest as the import of his actions in a sacrificial context. As a general matter, cannibalism may be seen as an ‘inverted or negative sacrifice’, in that the normal function of sacrifice is to mediate between god and man by offering up a lesser species – that is beasts – whereas cannibalism eradicates the species distinction.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ Hes. *Theog.* 556-67; West 1966:322.

¹¹¹ Detienne 1979:70 captures the dislocation involved in a shift to cannibalism: ‘To change one’s diet is to throw into doubt the relationship between gods, men, and beasts upon which the whole politico-religious system of the city rests.’

¹¹² Detienne 1989:3.

¹¹³ Detienne 1989:3.

¹¹⁴ See e.g. Hubbard 1997:35, 45 n. 62; Henderson 1997:144-45; Sommerstein 1987:303.

¹¹⁵ See Kotini 2005:213.

¹¹⁶ E.g. his language capacity. See *Av.* 199-200.

¹¹⁷ Redfield 2012:170; see also Farrell 2015:61; Segal 1974:306. It is also worth noting that species inversions occur throughout the colonisation process: the birds build the city *αὐτόχειρες* (‘with their own hands’, *Av.* 1135), while citizens flock from Athens to trade their *χεῖρες* for *πτερά* (‘wings’, 1304-7). And note in this context the black-glazed Attic amphoriskos moulded in the shape of a bird but with human hands, illustrated in Rothwell 2007:209 (collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999.68).

Numbers of myths concerning human sacrifice were of course already the familiar stuff of tragic fare.¹¹⁸ By implicitly calling up the entirety of the tragedians' treatment of the subject, Aristophanes thereby provided his own gloss on the relationship between cannibalism and sacrifice, reminding the audience that animal sacrifices may be but little removed from human ones.¹¹⁹ And by means of Peisetairus' cannibalism, Aristophanes was able not only to question the Hesiodic assumptions of civic progress discussed above, but also to test the conceptual framework of the festival's sacrificial system to the extent that its rituals resonated with the grim feasts of Greek myth.¹²⁰

Conclusions

As is clear from the above, *Birds* is suffused with the language of hymns, prayers and other ritual elements. The play is similarly laced with divine and mythic characters and cultic personnel, some of whom are framed by and presented through such language. There may, of course, be no single 'dominant' meaning to the play arising out of its employment of ritual elements: thus critics have variously focused on the *Birds* as an escapist response to the then-current war with Sparta,¹²¹ a pastoral fantasy,¹²² a

¹¹⁸ E.g. Aesch. *Ag.* 150, 219-20, 1095-97, 1217-22, 1584-98; Eur. *IT*; see Zeitlin 1965 and 1966. There is also a relationship between cannibalism and incest, i.e. the sexual consumption of one's kin. That birds are incestuous as well as cannibalistic (Auger 1979:84) only heightens the tension between savagery and society in the play. See also Parker 1983:99, noting the avian reference in the response of the Danaids to a perceived forced and incestuous marriage: ὄρνιθος ὄρνις πῶς ἂν ἀγγεῦσι φαγῶν ('bird consumes bird, how can it be pure?', Aesch. *Supp.* 226).

¹¹⁹ As Henrichs 1981:205 puts it: 'In established Greek religion, the myth of human sacrifice and the practice of animal substitution must be seen as two complementary aspects of the same ritual mechanism, by which a divine claim to a human life is settled without actual loss of human life, either by a token shedding of human blood or more often by sacrificing an animal instead of the ideal human victim.' See also Detienne 1979:57; Hughes 1991:82.

¹²⁰ E.g. Cronos eating Zeus; the Titans roasting and boiling Bacchus; Tantalus serving up Pelops to the gods; and Thyestes consuming his two sons. See Bonnechère 1994:94. I therefore disagree with the overbroad statement in Bierl 2009:48 that 'in comedy, myth functions as plot only when it makes fun of myth.' Here the myth operates in a serious way to frame the play's extended exploration of inverted sacrifice.

¹²¹ Murray 1933.

¹²² Pozzi 1986.

reversal of mythological patterns,¹²³ a play about ‘words, words, words’ as the substance of reality,¹²⁴ a civic ‘disfoundation’,¹²⁵ a parody of Thucydides’ ‘Archaeology’,¹²⁶ a linguistic manipulation of and mastery over costume,¹²⁷ a tale of sexual rejuvenation¹²⁸ and/or a captivating display of ancient ornithological knowledge.¹²⁹

Gregory Dobrov is therefore surely correct that *Birds* stands out among Aristophanes’ plays ‘for the obstinacy with which it has resisted attempts to capture its general theme.’¹³⁰ So without purporting to limit the play, I submit that it also may fruitfully be explored for its commentary on the relations among man, beast and god,¹³¹ including as a challenge to certain underlying assumptions concerning the progressive distancing of human behaviour from that of beasts. The setting of the Great Dionysia becomes essential at this point. On Henrichs’ view, myths concerning Dionysus such as those reflected in *Bacchae* are but a ‘worst-case scenario characterized by a disturbed relationship between men and gods’, and do not reflect the reconciling functions of the cult of Dionysus as celebrated within the *polis*.¹³² But if the god’s festival were meant to provide a normalising function, whereby its sacrificial rituals maintained species distinctions while distributing to gods and men the respective shares due them, that function seems wholly disrupted in this play, which conflates species distinctions and deprives the gods of their distributive share of the offerings.

It would therefore also be consistent with the fluidity of the Greek religious imagination to read the play as an allowable parody of, as well as challenge to, the efficacy of the cultic events of the Great Dionysia.¹³³ While

¹²³ Bowie 1993.

¹²⁴ Whitman 1964.

¹²⁵ Riu 1999.

¹²⁶ Rothwell 2007.

¹²⁷ Compton-Engle 2015.

¹²⁸ Segal 2001.

¹²⁹ Dunbar 1995.

¹³⁰ Dobrov 1997b:96.

¹³¹ Cf. *Ach.* 500; *Ran.* 388-9, 674-85; see Easterling 1997:52.

¹³² Henrichs 1990:258; Scullion 2002:107; but see Riu 1999:59-74: *Bacchae* is a source of ‘structuring motifs’ for ‘Dionysian’ ‘themes or concepts’ that may be traced in the comedies, including ‘mixtures’, form and gender shifts, boundary transgressions, ‘beast’ characterisations and ‘inversions’.

¹³³ Greek religion was capable of sustaining tension and apparent contradiction without giving rise to what we call ‘heresy’. Any alternative view would have to rely on distinctions between ritual and drama, and the religious and the secular, that are largely unsustainable in the context of plays performed at religious festivals. See e.g. Gagné and Hopman 2013:18-20; Csapo and Miller 2007:4-6; Henrichs

it would probably be going too far to say that *Birds*' hymns bedded into drama' were themselves 'used in cult' *simply* because the play was performed within the setting of a religious festival,¹³⁴ it is also doubtful that the audience made any bright-line distinction 'between the songs and dances of [the play] and the real-life forms of cultic activity'.¹³⁵ It may therefore be fair to say that *Birds*' 'hymnic formulary' serves Aristophanes' dramatic purposes,¹³⁶ including his creation of an alternative cosmogony and his gloss on Hesiodic distinctions between the cannibalism of birds and the justice of men.

The sense that Aristophanes has purposefully laced his play with cultic overtones for such purposes is only strengthened by the above analysis of *Birds*' hymns, prayers and sacrificial language and themes. As the discussion above makes clear, Aristophanes has called up a range of cultic references from myth and epic that necessarily enlarge the conceptual reach of the play. Much of the play, for example, suggests a desire to return to a form of the Hesiodic Golden Age, where gods and men feasted together.¹³⁷ Yet the Athenian travellers' discovery of a 'trouble-free place' where they might 'cohabit' with the birds¹³⁸ turns out to have a dystopian underside. While the Golden Age ended 'due to men's propensity for shedding their own (rather than animals') blood',¹³⁹ it nevertheless gave rise to the civilisation of the *polis* thanks to Prometheus' 'invention of sacrifice'.¹⁴⁰ The play's ironic gloss on Hesiod's 'Law of Cronos', however, is that when men join with birds in the new *polis* they not only take on the latter's allelophagic ways, but do so with the blessing of civilisation's supposed progenitor Prometheus, who

1995:59; Seaford 1981. And in this connection, one ought not to retrofit Judeo-Christian doctrinal concepts, for the Greeks did not make the distinctions between the 'sacred and the profane' that we often do; Easterling 1985:34-43. Athens, moreover, lacked a central religious authority structure (Burkert 1985:95), and that absence, coupled with polytheistic beliefs, allowed such conceptual range that 'one god in his many surnames sometimes contained completely different, even conflicting qualities ...' (Versnel 1981b:11).

¹³⁴ Bremer 1981:212-13.

¹³⁵ Easterling 1985:39; see also Straus 2011; Henrichs 1995:59; Bierl 2009:53-54.

¹³⁶ Bremer 1981:213.

¹³⁷ Rothwell 2007:152-54 points out, at the same time, that life in ancient times was not always that 'Edenic' for people or for birds.

¹³⁸ *Av.* 44, 324, 414; for the sexual connotations of σύνειμι see Dunbar 1995:261.

¹³⁹ Kirk 1981:79. While ritual murder and human sacrifice are theoretically distinct from one another as well as from killing in the broad sense (Hughes 1991:3, 10), and while neither invariably leads to cannibalism (*ibid.* 11), they do so often enough in myth to sustain a conceptual link to it. See Henrichs 1981:233-34.

¹⁴⁰ Detienne 1979:57.

urges Peisetairus to bargain for Zeus' sceptre as well as for the heavenly princess Basileia (*Av.* 1534-36).¹⁴¹ In other words, when Prometheus takes the stage he now seems to endorse the undoing and reversal of the hierarchy he first enabled, thus calling into question the stability of civic order in the first place.¹⁴²

Occurring – as *Birds* did – at a critical juncture in the midst of the Peloponnesian War when the outcome of the Sicilian expedition was as yet unknown, it was arguably only by way of Old Comedy's licensed self-examination and self-criticism that Aristophanes could so pointedly call into question the Hesiodic assumption of civilisation's progress. And it is therefore difficult to imagine that anyone in the audience missed the implicit questioning and critique of Athens' increasingly cuckoo war, pursued in protection and furtherance of its own empire.

By positing a bird-city in supersession of human rule, that is, supplanting careworn Athens with a supposedly carefree home in the sky,¹⁴³ Aristophanes thereby used a quasi-ritual enactment to test the boundaries of Athens' unity of civic purpose: by centring the play's action on a city-founding sacrifice, Aristophanes necessarily brought Athens' own political structure into view. One outcome is that any internal tensions of the city might well have been mirrored in the probably contradictory responses of audience members to the comic hero, Peisetairus – that is, some admiring his boldness as it paralleled 'the crest of Athenian self-confidence in 415 B.C.E.', with others perceiving dangers inherent in his Alcibiadean *hubris*,¹⁴⁴ including, but not limited to, his ejection of the 'secular' intruders on the city-founding sacrifice (geometer, inspector and decree-seller) as well as the 'religious' ones (priest, poet and prophet). That the play never resolves such tensions seems to me a good part of the reason it continues to resist uniform interpretations.¹⁴⁵

The play likewise tests the legal fabric of the city. As noted, in seeking to escape Athens' litigious character, the two travellers purported to look

¹⁴¹ See Rothwell 2007:159.

¹⁴² In this vein, Romer 1994:361 observes that Prometheus' appearance in the play echoes the reversal wrought by Peisetairus by 'remind[ing] the audience of the Greek paradigm for sacrifice which he had established', a 'trick' played on the gods whereby men 'received the desirable nutritious parts of the sacrificial victim [while] the gods got only the savory *knisa* of the less delectable parts.'

¹⁴³ Aristophanes did not, of course, anticipate the notion of Heaven as home above. Even so, his avian city in the sky has later resonance with the old gospel hymn, 'I'll Fly Away', available on YouTube.

¹⁴⁴ Nelson 2014:120-21; Anderson and Dix 2007:326.

¹⁴⁵ See Dobrov 1997b:96.

for a home free of laws (or at least of lawsuits). But what they found was a land where the laws of Athens are simply reversed – what’s unlawful in Athens is lawful among the birds (*Av.* 755-57). Peisetairus, in effect, simply seizes on the opportunity to turn the tables yet again and establish his own *nomos* by way of his ‘great plan’ to restore the birds to their former and rightful place in the cosmos. His plan, of course, ultimately substitutes himself for the gods as the birds’ ruler, the sort of bait-and-switch that would be familiar to those among the ‘masses’ in the audience who might well be sceptical of ‘elite’ leaders whose persuasive rhetoric was even at that moment leading the city down a primrose path to failure.¹⁴⁶ Peisetairus’ vision is also one that would likely have appeared to members of the audience to be in harmony with ‘the role of Athens as the tyrant city, suppressing domestic opposition to its dream of empire’¹⁴⁷ – regardless whether they were partisan or opposed to that role.

Finally, if a major premise of the play is the birds’ divine nature and a minor premise is that Peisetairus has taken on their nature, then it also follows that the normal purpose of cultic offerings – to bridge a gap between the worshipper/sacrificer and the gods – loses any fixed meaning, since both the sacrificer and the victim are themselves divine. To be sure, it is a curious form of communion whereby Peisetairus ‘takes and eats’ and thereby shares the birds’ φύσις;¹⁴⁸ but my point is that a reconfiguring of familiar ritual elements is simply one of the ways in which Aristophanes both explores and questions core structures of the Greek religious system. Outside of the world of the play Greek sacrifice is marked by its seeking of the gods’ χάρις in a post-Promethean world. But Peisetairus’ sacrifice of his demi-fellow-birds has nothing to do with obtaining the gods’ favour; instead, it becomes part of his marriage ceremony celebrating union and thus divine equality with a goddess.¹⁴⁹ And indeed, the play’s closing wedding hymn necessarily reflects the complexities of Dionysus’ own ‘qualities’ as a god of wine, ecstasy and dance,¹⁵⁰ all within the context of a ritual marriage ceremony echoing that of another Spring festival to Dionysus, the Anthesteria.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Henderson 1997:138-39.

¹⁴⁷ Konstan 1997:15-16.

¹⁴⁸ See Harrison 1927:110; cf. Henrichs 1981:229-30 (discussing *John* 6:53).

¹⁴⁹ Indeed, Aristophanes arguably toys with an expansion of the pantheon by virtue of the Priest’s prayer to ‘all the birds’ as well as to the Olympians (*Av.* 866-67); and to that extent he harks back to epic and other early Greek images of gods, birds and ‘holy bird’ dances; Lawler 1942; Pollard 1948; Harrison 1927:111-12.

¹⁵⁰ Easterling 1997:45; Henrichs 1990:258.

¹⁵¹ See Craik 1987:33.

Taken as a whole, I therefore submit that *Birds* cannot credibly be read free of its immersion in ritual language and themes. And as this study suggests, our appreciation of Old Comedy's function within the performative setting of the Great Dionysia is enhanced by a deeper understanding of the play's multivalent reflections of that festival's cultic and civic celebrations.

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