

## ON ARISTOPHANES' *BIRDS*

DANIEL HOLMES, *Philosophy, Poetry, and Power in Aristophanes's Birds*, Lanham: Lexington, 2019. ISBN: 9781498590761.

THIS BOOK IS A SLIGHTLY REVISED VERSION of Holmes' 2006 doctoral thesis 'Power and Persuasion in Aristophanes' *Birds*' (University of Virginia) and is essentially a running commentary on the play, which follows the characterisation of Peisetaerus. The starting point for Holmes' argument is David Konstan's model of the contradictory ideological strands upon which the birds' city is founded: the anomian, the antinomian, the eunomian, and the megalonomian.<sup>1</sup> For Holmes, Peisetaerus is a master of persuasion, a sophist who manipulates these ideologies to achieve his private aspirations, and an elitist pederast who in contrast to Dikaiopolis or Trygaeus is not content with rural festivities (xi-xiv). In other words, he is a type that Old Comedy used to mock. With such a protagonist, Aristophanes wants to show that sophists are a threat to the traditions of the city, as they represent the defeat of *nomos* (the laws) at the hands of *physis* ('the natural'), which in fact is an ethical vacuum opportunistically defined at each sophist's will. In comedy, this defeat is best illustrated by the motif of father-beating (xix-xxii); in each cosmic realm (divine, human, avian), Peisetaerus invites the young generation to overthrow their fathers.

Holmes attempts (xxii-xxiv) to expand Konstan's model, by arguing that each utopian ideology entails a different conception of *physis*, all of which are exploited by Peisetaerus as appropriate. In the spirit of *antynomia* (inversion of laws), *physis* means a quiet happy life (espoused by Euplides); according to *anomia* (absence of laws), *physis* is the 'law' of the jungle (expressed by the chorus); in line with *megalonomia* (limitless laws), *physis* encourages unrestrained desires (envisioned by Tereus). But with regard to *eunomia*, Holmes is not consistent with Konstan (who defines it as 'excellent laws',<sup>2</sup> not as 'obedience to laws') and does not clarify who

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1. D. Konstan, "Aristophanes' *Birds* and the City in the Air", *Arethusa* 23 (1990) 183-207.

2. Ibid. 191.

supports this ideology within the play. This ambitious but forced taxonomy is abandoned, quite naturally, in the course of the book.

Chapter 1 explains the contrast between Euelpides and Peisetaerus. The protagonists are of the same status, so that we assume that they have similar motivations. Euelpides, first, claims that he wants an *apragmona* city but of an *oikos*-centred lifestyle. Peisetaerus, on the other hand, is radically anti-Athenian and seeks an anti-*oikos* of an urban and pederastic lifestyle. Therefore, the role of Euelpides is to build-up expectations that Peisetaerus will soon subvert.

Chapter 2 deals with the persuading of Tereus, who was initially content with the apolitical bird life. Because he was a human and a king, Peisetaerus reminds him of the benefits of living within a *polis* and appeals to his inherent *eros* for wealth, honour, and power; such things, of course, could not exist in the present bird realm. However, this psychoanalytical approach of Tereus' mentality is not supported by the text, with *eros* appearing only once (v.76: he loves to eat sardines); the conception of Tereus as an erotic figure is an absurd extension of the tragic myth of Tereus' raping Philomela, a story which is never mentioned in *Birds*. Presumably, the comic Tereus is persuaded just because he is naive.

Chapter 3 examines the persuading of the birds. First, Tereus approaches them by evoking principles already acceptable to them: friendship and communal interest (vv.312-21). Then Peisetaerus arouses their indignation for the usurpation of their (supposed) prior rule, and therefore it is a matter of 'natural justice' to restore it. The birds seem to already have a sense of 'natural justice' (a mix of ideas found in Antiphon and the pre-Socratics) which Peisetaerus now presents as violated by Zeus. Peisetaerus offers them an earlier vision of the cosmic order, and therefore a more just and natural one.

Chapter 4 focuses on how Peisetaerus, via the birds, persuades the humans in the parabasis. The epirrhema (vv.753-68) appeals to the *polypragmones* like Peisetaerus, while the antepirrhema (vv.785-800) appeals to the *apragmones* like Euelpides; together, they offer 'a comic depiction of how pseudo-religions... appeal to all-to-human desires and hopes' (56). The very premise of the chapter, however, is never argued for: why is the birds' persuasive power automatically credited to Peisetaerus? On a secondary issue, there is a notable difficulty with explaining why the birds, who are the offspring of Chaos and Eros, are 'not erotic themselves' (48, 61-2).

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the interloper scenes. The first group of intruders, those coming before the foundation of the avian polis, are beaten off stage (except for the poet) because they represent versions of the Athenian *polypragmosyne* which has no place in Cloudduckooland. This creates a vacuum of conventional *nomoi*, so that Peisetaerus can pass his own ones. The second group of intruders come after the foundation of the polis. The *mechane*, which in tragedy was used to re-impose the divine order, is now (with Iris) representing the upsetting of that order (98): a very compelling argument indeed.

Chapter 7 offers a very extensive comparison of *Birds* to *Clouds* on the topic of father-beating. In *Clouds*, the victory of *physis* over *nomos* (justifying the son beating his father) leads to violence (arson of the Thinkery). In *Birds*, Peisetaerus is more careful than Socrates, in order to maintain his position; he urges the second group of interlopers to civic and lawful work, and he especially condemns father-beating because he himself becomes the new 'father' (119-121). Drawing such comparisons, transferring the moral of one play to another, is a questionable approach and certainly not what the audience of *Birds* would do (besides, the arson of the Thinkery was probably added in the revised version of *Clouds*).

The two final chapters examine the persuading of the gods' embassy and whether Peisetaerus becomes a tyrant. The decisive point in the negotiations with the embassy is the persuasion of Hercules; this is achieved by invoking both *physis* (his desire for the roasts) and *nomos* (the legal argument that, as a bastard son of Zeus, Hercules has nothing to inherit). As for Peisetaerus' barbeque, Holmes deems that it is not a tyrannical act, but a lawful means of showing who the new god is, i.e. nothing worse than what Zeus would have done.

Overall, the discussion often becomes unnecessarily extensive, simply narrating the plot and the dialogues, and with long diversions from the main point. Moreover, the original title (that of the thesis) would fit more accurately with the contents, since the added words *Philosophy* and *Poetry* raise expectations which the book itself does not fulfil (e.g. there is no discussion of the possible influence of Orphism, of to the poetological dimension of the play). After thirteen years, the reader would expect a significant update of the bibliography, not merely in the reference list but within the main discussion, and some tightening of the argument. Some notable omissions are: T. Long (1972) "Persuasion and the Aristophanic Agon" *TAPhA* 103, 285-299; J. Henderson (2003) "Demos, Demagogue, Tyrant in Attic Old Comedy", in K. Morgan (ed.) *Popular Tyranny*, Austin TX, 155-79;

J. Zumbrennen (2014) “Persuasion in Comedy and Comic Persuasion”, in J. Mhire and B.-P. Frost (eds.) *The Political Theory of Aristophanes*, Albany, 69-87; K. DeLuca (2014) “Herodotean Inquiry: The Meaning of Athenian Imperialism in the *Birds*”, in 161-82 of the same volume; M. Georgousi (2016) *Αριστοφάνης και σοφιστική*, Athens; E. Magnelli (2017) “Rethinking Aristophanes’ Comic Hero: Utopianism, Ambiguity, and Athenian Politics”, *Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek Political Thought* 34, 390-404.

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