

# Aristophanes Comedy Birds:

## ΟΡΦΙΚΑ and ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΑ

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The comedy *Birds*, staged in Athens at the time of the City Dionysia in 414 BC, is the longest of all preserved comedies by Aristophanes. It consists of 1765 verses, i.e. it is by at least 230 verses longer than the *Wasps* and *Peace*, and by more than 500 verses longer than *Acharnians* and *Thesmophoriazusae*. Among all preserved dramas there is only one which is longer than *Birds*, Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Coloneus* - 1779 verses, i.e. only by 14 verses longer. The long tragedies like *Agamemnon* (1673 verses), Euripides' *Ion* (1622), *Helen* (1692) and *Orestes* (1693) are by about 150 to 70 verses shorter than *Birds*. Most of them are dated to the time after 414 BC. Its 22 parts are more than any of the other comedies by Aristophanes. In spite of its length, this comedy is remarkably homogeneous in terms of its plot and composition.

Even at the end of last century, O. Kern<sup>1</sup> noted perceptible Orphic reminiscences in the bird's "theogony", ironically referred to as "ornithogony" (693-702), in the comedy *Birds* by Aristophanes. Several years later, A. Dieterich<sup>2</sup> saw in the initiation scene of the comedy *Clouds* by Aristophanes, in which Socrates introduced Strepsiades into θεῖα πράγματα, an imitation of the Orphic mysteries, whereby the Orpheotelestes sprinkled lime and gypsum over the neophytes, following the tradition of Dionysos-Zagreus, who was killed by the Titans disguised in this way. However, in some passages<sup>3</sup> philologists detect a parody of liturgical hymns which functioned indeed, being probably used in the Orphic τελεταί. The idea generated many followers<sup>4</sup>. In his philological quests on the parody of religious forms and formulae, H. Kleinknecht attributes the new bird's "politeia" *Nephelococcygia* to the sphere of the mysterial parodies<sup>5</sup>, detecting an imitation of the mysterial language indicated by stable formulae as ὄλβιος, μακάριος ὅς ἔχεις<sup>6</sup>, ὦ μάκαρ, ὄστις<sup>7</sup>. Irrespective of the presence of elements of Hesiod's *Theogony*, M. P. Nilsson<sup>8</sup> does not doubt the Orphic character of the bird's "cosmogony" and even assumed an imitation of a well known prototype. In that understanding he follows H.W.Thomas<sup>9</sup>, who in studying Plato's myths about the World Beyond, assumes that the philosopher was familiar with an Orphic cosmogony in an epic form which he often cites<sup>10</sup> and which even Aristophanes parodied in his comedy *Birds*. The verses of this parody refer to the view about life and death, similar to fragments 638 and 844 of Euripides and in Empedocles,

which was expressed in Orphic verses. W. K. Guthrie sees in the parody of Aristophanes' *Birds* a reminiscence of an Orphic theogony and introduces these verses (693-702) into the interpretation of the motif about the cosmic egg<sup>11</sup>. However, modern researchers, who do not expand the scope of research of Orphic reminiscences in the comedy outside the "ornithogony", are expressing their skepticism less and less ambiguously, finding "the joke with the Orphic notions as being secondary"<sup>12</sup>.

There is no doubt concerning the political character of Aristophanes' comedies and their reflection of topical events in the Athenian polis, which in the early spring of 414 BC was seized by a strong anxiety, combining the growing superstition and the feeling of religious instability, with apprehensions of encroachments on the Athenian democratic traditions, excited by the profanation of the Eleusinian mysteries and the religious and political initiatives of Alcibiades, the strategos of the Athenian arche<sup>13</sup>. Reminiscences of a similar religious and political conflict can be reconstructed through the behaviour of the stratego, who was presented on the stage just one year earlier by Eupolides in his comedy *Baptai* amidst a chorus of effeminate worshippers and there he is performing the mysteries of the Thracian Kotytia. The brilliant plan of the adventurer Peisetaios, in whose imperial initiatives researchers from J.W. Süvern and G. Droysen<sup>14</sup> to our days perceive the ultimate plan of Alcibiades, was to found a state of the birds, convincing them that they are the real gods, being a more ancient race than that of the gods. However, if "every individual fantasy is a manifestation of a desire, correction of the unsatisfactory reality", what is the corrected reality of Aristophanes' in the comedy *Birds*?

In such an atmosphere, the character of the Old-Attic comedy does not allow a "flight from reality" and a "free flight of the imagination" towards utopian and speculative political alternatives of a society submerged in its pragmatism. However, if the analysis of the text of the comedy *Birds* is approached by identifying the functional elements of the "avian ἀρχή", in their attitude to the "raw material of ideological values", the Orphic parody complex would become structure-forming. The illusion that the comedy intrigue is centered around the mythical and ritual complex of the founding of the new city and its oikist deflected the attention from the structure-forming conflict of the mystery of the immortalization through the myth about Tereus and the myth about the enthroning of the "new Zeus", Dionysos-Zagreus, who marked the change of the old generation of gods by the new ones. In this sense, the comedies of Aristophanes fit the consistent model maintaining "the duality of subjective and objective institutions", identified by R. Friedrich<sup>15</sup> with *Polissittlichkeit* and the "spirit of the critical reflexion", i.e. the independent subjectivity which is outside the institutions of the polis and functions with a conduct of its own. Being traditional, Aristophanes defends traditional

behaviour and institutions against everything that could reduce them to individual and critical judgements, imposing the free objectivity. Consequently, the approach to the correct reading of *Birds* could be sought in the tension of that dualist model, combining religious-political behaviour at two levels: public and individual, which mutually presuppose each other, finding an accurate expression in the opposition πολυπραγμοσύνη - ἀπραγμοσύνη. However, this relative "subjectivity", incomprehensible to the religious and political principles of the polis behaviour began to be gradually identified in the 5th century BC, and especially in its last quarter, with the image of the "alien", often assuming the outlines of the ancient Thracian mythical and ritual conventionality<sup>16</sup>. This is why, Orpheus could not have come from anywhere else but from Thrace. It is interesting that the spreading of the Orphic notions in Athens had two culminations in the 5th century BC: during the tyranny of the Peisistratids, when Onomacritus founded the first historically attested Orphic sect, and in Herodotus (II.81) there appeared fragments of the Orphic ἱερός λόγος; and in the last quarter of the century - in the dramaturgy of Euripides and Aristophanes, which betrays the hostile attitude of the official polis institutions to this type of religious and political behaviour, best represented by Alcibiades, the strategos of the Athenian arche. Towards the end of the century, that behaviour acquired religious-philosophical nuances (ἀπραγμοσύνη). Hence Plato was the last who belonged to that epoch, introducing τὰ ὄρφικὰ in his dialogues. Therefore, both the events and the persons building the background for his suggestions, should invariably be dated to the second half of the 5th century BC. Only the Neo-Platonians were to resurrect τὰ ὄρφικὰ, but in another religious, political and philosophical context.

In one of his latest articles on the nature of science fiction, Umberto Eco<sup>17</sup> notes that the fantastic narrative differs from the realistic one in the fact that its possible world is structurally different from the real world. To the numerous paths which science fiction can take he attributes the alternative concepts for allotopia, uchronia, metachronia and metatopia, as well as the familiar utopia. The classification given by U. Eco provides an orientation about the ways in which utopian society is directly related to the conventional representation of itself. Hence it is possible to approach the analysis of Aristophanes' *Birds* by identifying the elements of this "utopian or realistic construction" in their attitude to the "crude material" of ideological values." The perception of the Old-Attic comedy as a type of ideological production, an effort to transform material of ideological values suggests the revealing of the tendencies and mechanisms that had reduced them to dramaturgic fiction. The study of the symbol structures and narrative solutions in the identification of the comedy space and thematic sources of that comedy by Aristophanes, considered to be most fantastic and least comprehensible, could be

directed towards the interpenetration of the parodied religious notions and political institutions in the comedy structure, where some of the comedy characters and para-tragic usurpations exemplify programmed mythical-dramaturgical relations with an initiating function.

In the analysis of the comedy text it is possible to abstract clearly four groups of comedy motifs, indicating the structure-forming function of the Orphic parody complex, which predetermine the structure of the presentation:

The first group is organized around the myth about the Thracian king Tereus, who - in addition to his function of initiator of the new dynast of the Universe into the "avian" mystery - identifies the religious (Orphic) parody complex and simultaneously with this also the comedy space designated by the chimaeric religious-political notion about τόπον ἀπράγμονα. Tereus is also genealogically bound to the Orphic tradition through the version of the Paros marble inscription (264/263 BC)<sup>18</sup>. Although his name is introduced for the first time in verse 15, he appears in verse 92 of the Prologue (1-208) and leaves the comedy action at the end of the first episode (434-675). The analysis of this group of motifs naturally integrates the parody Orphic motifs and prohibitions, discretely interwoven into the comedy text, notably the prohibition to wear woollen garments and to bury the deceased in them (120-123, cf. 277 and 836); the ban on eating meat and the vegetarian way of life (413-414a; 1102-1103; 159-160, 227-262; 276; 611-625; especially 533-538, 718-719 and 1579-1590)<sup>19</sup>; the prohibition to allow a swallow (Philomele) to enter the house (1680 sq.); the imitation of human sacrifice (531-532; cf. 464; 849 sq.; 1579-1589), which was inherent to the Orphic king only etc.

The mythological motif about the unfortunate Thracian king who underwent a metamorphosis into a bird acquired a particular initiation function between the real, i.e. Hellenic, polis and imaginary, the atopic, parodying the non-polis, "barbarian" space, exemplified through the ancient Thracian mythical-literary convention, in a markedly sacral, Orphic context.

The second group refers to the avian "cosmogony", the so-called "ornithogony" (685-702), which for most of the classics of academic research about the antiquity, from O. Kern and A. Dieterich to our days, evokes no doubts with its Orphic character. The battle avian cosmogony is of integral significance for the Orphic texts and suggestions, woven ostensibly chaotically and unsystematically into the comedy text, and building up the religious and ideological background of the avian "polity".

The third group is concentrated around the Orphic mythological motif about the sceptre, which is introduced in the comedy action by means of two basic parties: in the epyrrhema of the agones (462-480) and in the anti-epyrrhema of

the agones (550 sq.), ending in a peculiarly formed sphragis (627 sq.), with the solemn oath of the birds that the gods will not hold their sceptre for a long time more. The sceptre motif indicates a circle of specific religious-ideological notions that transcend the profane level of the purely political insignia and has its prototypes in Orphic texts. At a sacral level, presupposing the knowledge of definite Orphic formulae and associations, the sceptre suggests sophisticated cosmic functions:

- first, a definitive symbol of divine dynasty;
- second, a symbol of mantic and prophetic talents, combined in priestly functions;
- third, the mystery of coming closer to the world of the gods, manifested in the attaining of the mystery of immortality.

The attaining of this sacrament must have been the highest sacral knowledge to which the person initiated in the Orphic mysteries aspired. Aristophanes parodied that mystery in the solemn final scene of epiphany and apotheosis, combined with the stable motif of the "sacred marriage" to the enigmatic goddess Basileia, who does not correspond to the Olympian Pantheon.

The fourth group is organized around the parody ritual complex of the hierogamy with the mystic goddess Basileia: the funerary feast, the culmination of the grandiose epiphany and apotheosis of the "new Zeus" in the person of the man-bird (-god) Peisetairos (1706-1765). The name of Basileia appears only towards the end of the comedy (1536-1543) in the scene with Prometheus. The eternal "friend of the people" appears in the newly-founded Nephelococcygia to advise Peisetairos not to conclude peace with the starving gods before Zeus returns the sceptre to the birds, giving Basileia to him.

The festive wedding scene is presented in three parts. The motif of the thunderbolt of Zeus, with which the adventurer Peisetairos appears, is central and organizing in thematic and compositional terms for this scene. While the married couple are heading in a wedding procession to their marital bed, the chorus of the birds sings praise in a hymn that resembles the Orphic poetic texts in its linguistic formulae and structures in honour of the thunderbolt of Zeus, which is at the same time *χθονίας*, but also *ἀστεροπίας* and *ὄμβροφόροι* (1751). The praise of these attributes, further elaborated with relatively rare poetic expressions (1750-1751: *χθόνιαν...ὄμβροφόροι θ' ἅμα βρονταί*) in a wedding ceremony, is not customary. The winged arrow (*πετροφόρος Διὸς βέλος*, cf. the winged thunderbolt in verses 572-575: *πετρόεντα κεραυνόν*), which the anthropodaimon Peisetairos (referred to as man both by birds and by gods: 1726-1730, cf. 1575, 1581) wields in his hands together with the thunderbolt of Zeus, resembles the winged arrow with which the messenger of the Hyperboreans Abaris went round the world.

In this way, the final scene indicates the intensive presence of the aristocratic Orphic doctrine as structure-forming for the comedy composition of Aristophanes' *Birds*, being the only one which presumed the faith in the deification of man, which was alien to the Olympian notions, and unified incompatible categories like god and man, absolute immortality and the transitoriness of death.

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## NOTS

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