

BOOK REVIEW

Philosophy, Poetry, and Power in Aristophanes's Birds. By DANIEL HOLMES. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019. Pp. xxxviii + 208. Hardback, \$115.00. ISBN 978-1-4985-9076-1.

Holmes' lively and engaging book seeks to situate Aristophanes' longest comedy not simply in the fraught politics of 414 (on which it makes a few direct political comments) but also deeply in the charged contemporary philosophical and rhetorical debates about power and politics in Athens. The fresh insights here are numerous, even if the portrait of a highly opportunistic hero that emerges still leaves some questions unanswered.

The 30-page introduction is essential for following the dense but intriguing argument about a play which "employs a plot structure that constantly undermines the audience's expectations" (ix). Holmes views the play neither as pure escapist fantasy nor as pointed political critique of Athenian imperialism but primarily as a portrait of Peisetaerus the sophistic rhetorician at work, persuading successive audiences to join his evermore self-aggrandizing plans. Building on Chris Carey's work ("Old Comedy and the Sophists," in D. Harvey and J. Wilkins, eds., *The Rivals of Aristophanes*), Holmes shows how Aristophanes is distinct among Old Comic poets in his interest in the Sophists. Crucially, Holmes utilizes David Konstan's analysis ("The Greek Polis and its Negations: Versions of Utopia in Aristophanes' *Birds*" in G.W. Dobrov, ed., *The City as Comedy*) of the different strains of utopian thinking in the play (antinomian, anominian, megalonomian and eunominian) to argue that these are not just a comically disparate mixture but stages in Peisetaerus's persuasive strategy.

The first chapter analyzes the prologue as a bait-and-switch approach to the audience's expectations. Unique among surviving comedies, *Birds* employs for plot introduction two old citizen men (rather than chatty slaves) in search of "Te-reus the hoopoe." As Holmes acknowledges, costumes and masks (and the birds they carry) would have allowed the audience to differentiate clearly between these two characters though not yet name them. With only the verse to rely on, editors have found the problems of line allocation at the beginning severe. Holmes, largely following Coulon (see further Holmes' Appendix 1), gives most

of the exposition to a dim and sometimes self-contradictory Euelpides, who regards Athens' lawsuit-plagued democracy as the worst kind of city—except for all the others. The confused Euelpides wants either an Athens without problems or perhaps a pre-political city with only the pleasures of family life. At this stage the audience may well think they are in for one of the utopian comedies of the 420s.

Then Peisetaerus emerges from the background. Tereus initially arrives as a comic spectacle, his feathers falling out as Sophocles "disfigured" him. For Holmes, Tereus is not just a visual parody but a specifically tragic tyrant, one the audience will recognize as still subject to *eros*. Particularly intriguing here is Holmes' argument about Tereus's slave-bird: Euelpides finds it inexplicable that a bird Tereus (living in an anomian world where nature provides every need) needs a slave, but this slave still sometimes fetching human fare for his master shows Tereus still subject to human desires. Peisetaerus's plan for a city among the birds persuades Tereus by arousing his tyrannical *eros* for domination (with arguments that vanish from the plot once Tereus is won over—Chapter 2).

The bird chorus arrives profoundly hostile to the humans. The anomian birds live simply according to nature (Holmes shows how Peisetaerus can argue whichever side of the *nomos/physis* debate is currently to his advantage), and they lack *eros* for anything since nature provides all their wants—yet in hostile solidarity against human predators. Peisetaerus deftly shifts grounds to justice (*dikē*), persuading the birds that they were once the true rulers of the universe, long before the Olympians' rise. The birds swear a one-sided agreement with Peisetaerus, promising not to harm him while they create the new bird city—without exacting a reciprocal promise from Peisetaerus not to harm them (Chapter 3).

The fourth chapter ("Persuading Human Beings") devotes an initial five pages to Peisetaerus overcoming Euelpides' worries in the *agōn* and the rest to the *parabasis* containing the birds' great cosmogony. The birds are descended from winged Eros, born from an egg, mingling with Chaos. Apparently inheriting their own flighty natures only from winged Chaos, the birds use the erotic appeal of all kinds of benefits on earth, to entice the audience (=humanity) into the new bird city, throwing off the shackles of human *nomos*.

The next three chapters illumine both fascinating parallels and differences in the two series of interlopers (*alazōnes*), invading the new city. Only the first, a poet seeking to praise the new city, escapes with a modest reward and without a beating. The next four, all representing different kinds of intrusive Athenian *nomoi*, are driven violently from the stage. While Peisetaerus finishes the foundation sacrifice offstage, the chorus's second parabasis reaffirms the city's anomian

nature. Iris's attempt to penetrate the city's boundaries is repelled by Peisetaerus's threats of rape and violence, thus enforcing the blockade of Olympus. Then the would-be father beater can be incorporated into the defense of the new city while Cinesias the dithyrambist and the sycophant with their selfish and intrusive *no-moi* must again be driven away.

Chapters 8 ("Persuading the Gods") and 9 ("Peisetaerus Tyrannos") analyze the essential sophistry of Peisetaerus's final victory. An emasculated Prometheus reveals that Basileia is the real key to Zeus's power. Peisetaerus wins Zeus's scepter by persuading Poseidon that the birds will now cooperate in forcing men to restore sacrifice and obedience to the Olympians (thus undermining all the benefits once promised to men under bird rule); however, to win Heracles' vote to hand over Basileia, Peisetaerus switches to a *nomos*-based argument, proving Heracles as a *nothos* cannot inheriting if Zeus dies. In an ending which may be the anti-New Comedy *avant la lettre*, Peisetaerus breaks up the Olympian semi-happy family through a "final, but legal, 'father beating'" (140), usurping the father of gods and men by turning the son's vote in his favor. Peisetaerus's notoriously contested cooking and consumption of rebel birds is in Holmes' view not so much a demonstration of his "tyranny" as "a parody of the divine pattern: a pre-emptive act of eating... to establish a secure regime" (150).

Beyond its recapitulation of the stages of Peisetaerus's persuasion, the conclusion suggests that the plot plays on fifth century notions of social contract in the evolution of the *polis*. The clever sophist induces the birds to see themselves as beneficent golden age gods granting all men's desires, only later metamorphosing into punishing divinities in league again with the Olympian gods in order to secure Peisetaerus's supremacy. Yet Holmes insists that Peisetaerus does not become "an 'evil Zeus'" but establishes a "just cosmos" (166) —though one from which he has repelled every human agent of persuasion who could compete with him. Still Holmes finds this ending aesthetically repellent: Peisetaerus is "an ugly bird-mutant" (uglier than comic characters regularly are?) and the image of him married to Basileia "repugnant" (167).

Holmes' analysis of Peisetaerus as the embodiment of sophistic persuasion is richly provocative and should be of interest to all students of Old Comedy. Whether an ending that simultaneously creates a just cosmos and an aesthetically repugnant ruler coheres comically seems equally sure to generate further enthusiastic debate.

