Political Myth in Aristophanes:
Another Form of Comic Satire?

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SCHOLARLY TREATMENT of the use of traditional myth[1] by Aristophanes has mostly employed the following perspectives:

a. The combining of comic plots and mythical elements for political satire. Comic poets use traditional mythical elements to enrich newly invented plots which entail satire of current political and social issues. For example, the plot of *Lysistrata*, which draws on traditional myths of gynecocracy,[2] satirises the political and social dead end reached by wartime Greeks, suggesting a comically unrealistic solution.

b. The parody of tragic myth, on which several comedies depend for some of their basic plot lines (*Acharnians*, *Thes-*

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[1] It is worth stressing that as regards comedy the term "myth" refers not only to traditional myth (also exploited by tragedy), but further to the new stories invented by the comic poets, which may be regarded as equivalent to myths (indeed they take the place that traditional myth has in other genres and were themselves termed μῦθοι by the ancient Greeks, e.g. Arist. *Poet.* 1449b8). Comic plots and characters are new inventions (as the comic poet Antiphanes remarked in the fourth century, fr.189.17–21). Still, a fair proportion of ancient comedies derived their basic plots from traditional myths; no 'mythological' comedies survive, although this type of comedy became very popular in the first half of the fourth century (see A. M. Bowie, "Myth in Aristophanes," in R. D. Woodard [ed.], *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology* [Cambridge 2007] 191–194, and H. G. Nesselrath, *Die attische mittlere Komödie: ihre Stellung in der antiken Literaturkritik und Literaturgeschichte* [Berlin/New York 1990] 188–241).

[2] A famous such myth was that of the Lemnian women, subject of one of Aristophanes' lost plays (*Lemniae*).

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mophoriazusae, *Frogs*).[3]

c. A third, less prominent perspective is the substratum of myth and ritual discerned by structural analysis, which has attempted to connect comic myth with familiar rituals and mythical archetypes; this is a controversial approach.[4]

The present paper will attempt to broaden the existing perception of the use of myth in Aristophanes by proposing a fourth perspective, which relates to the aforementioned ones and aims to complement them: the comic use of political myth. It will be argued that this perspective offers an interpretative route for selected contexts in *Acharnians* and *Birds*.[5]

Political myth is usually produced by the reinterpretation or the reworking of traditional mythical material so that it may bear political significance. Myths formed in this way constitute new versions which contribute to the self-definition of cities or social groups, or serve to justify political developments.[6] For such mythical references to the past, with socio-political function and ideological significance, the alternative term "inten-

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[3] A systematic study is P. Rau, *Paratragodia: Untersuchung einer komischen Form des Aristophanes* (Munich 1967).

[4] The origin of this perspective lies in F. Cornford's *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (Cambridge 1934). It is represented in recent scholarship by A. M. Bowie, *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy* (Cambridge 1993), but see also R. Rosen's review in *BMCR* 94.10.11: even though some of the connections made between comic myth and attested rituals may appear convincing, "there do remain … lingering questions about how significant an analysis of such rituals, or metaphors derived from ritual, are for an interpretation of the plays."

[5] The comic uses of political myth discussed here form part of an ongoing project by the author.

[6] For an overview of this type of myth, with examples, see J. M. Hall, "Politics and Greek Myth," in *Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology* 331–354. Cf. E. Kearns, *Heroes of Attica* (London 1989) 112: "A people's *mythical history* must define not only its outstanding and definitive characteristics, but also the historical stages by which its constitution as one people came to be expressed in political terms" (emphasis mine).

tional history" is currently also used.[7] The phrase expresses the blend of myth and history (the two were intertwined in ancient thought) which the ancient Greeks saw as their past. This kind of cultivation of memory secures the survival and consolidation of collective identity (according also to ethnological research) and has the power to influence the future.[8] The political use of myth has its roots in archaic poetry;[9] Athenian politics is known to have taken advantage of poetic myth of this kind.[10]

It is only natural that political myth, which is found in historical and poetic settings, should have an echo in the comedy of Aristophanes. We would expect Aristophanes' political comedy to be significantly attracted to this particular type of myth: political comedy is filled with contemporary allusions, and political myth is an appropriate carrier of such allusions in a poetic context. This is not to suggest that political

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[7] The term, which has an ethnological background, was proposed by H.-J. Gehrke, "Myth, History and Collective Identity: Uses of the Past in Ancient Greece and Beyond," in N. Luraghi (ed.), *The Historian's Craft in the Age of Herodotus* (Oxford 2001) 286–313, at 297–298. Thanks are due to M. Tamiolaki for drawing my attention to the relevant bibliography.

[8] Cf. Gehrke, in *The Historian's Craft* 302. Note also the phrase "legendary history," used by W. W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus* II (Oxford 1928) 187.

[9] Cf. H.-J. Gehrke, "Greek Representations of the Past," in L. Foxhall et al. (eds.), *Intentional History: Spinning Time in Ancient Greece* (Stuttgart 2010) 18–23; F. Graf, *Greek Mythology: An Introduction* (Baltimore 1993) 125–130. Homeric and Hesiodic poetry, using mythical genealogies as a tool, tried to justify the political organisation of the world up to the generation of the Trojan war.

[10] For example, the Attic genealogy of Ion (Hes. *Cat.* fr.10a.20–24 M.-W. = fr.5 Hirschberger) establishes the Athenian claim of kinship with the Ionian cities, over which Athens wished to preside; cf. M. L. West, *The Hesiodic Catalogue of Women* (Oxford 1985) 57 and n.58, 168–171, on elements of Athenian propaganda in the poem. The central literary manifestation of this claim is Euripides' *Ion*, on whose political significance see K. Zacharia, *Converging the Truths: Euripides' Ion and the Athenian Quest for Self-definition* (Leiden 2003) 48–55.

myth in comedy should bear a 'serious' message;[11] in what follows, it will be argued that this type of myth provides comedy by lending itself (like all myth) to comic satire. The examples discussed below, from two different plays, suggest political myth both as a source of comic plot elements and as an object of satire; the function of this form of satire will be closely examined.

1. *Acharnians*

The first example comes from the famous passage that contains a satirical explanation of the causes of the Peloponnesian War (523–529):[12]

καὶ ταῦτα μὲν δὴ σμικρὰ κἀπιχώρια,
πόρνην δὲ Σιμαίθαν ἰόντες Μεγαράδε
νεανίαι 'κκλέπτουσι μεθυσοκότταβοι·
κᾆθ' οἱ Μεγαρῆς ὀδύναις πεφυσιγγωμένοι
ἀντεξέκλεψαν Ἀσπασίας πόρνα δύο·
κἀντεῦθεν ἀρχὴ τοῦ πολέμου κατερράγη
Ἕλλησι πᾶσιν ἐκ τριῶν λαικαστριῶν.

The hero, Dikaiopolis, comically identifies the *real* reason for the war: the Athenians abducted a *hetaira* from Megara, and the Megarians reciprocated by snatching two Athenian prostitutes; thus war broke out, because of three whores! This version of the reason for the war between Athens and Sparta parallels the proem of Herodotos' *Histories* about the root causes of the enmity between West and East and therefore also of the Persian Wars: according to Persian and Phoenician tradition, these lie in the abduction of women which was started by the Phoenicians and culminated in the Trojan abduction of Helen. The Greco-Persian war was by far the most important event of Herodotos' time and would have naturally attracted the inter-

[11] Or that it should be made part of the ongoing debate on comedy's 'seriousness'; for an overview of this issue see M. S. Silk, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy* (Oxford 2000) 301 ff.

[12] The text used here is N. G. Wilson's OCT (2007).

est of great many people; this should explain the creation and circulation of stories about its causes. Within the framework of such popular stories, myths would be granted political significance—a practice from which Herodotos apparently distances himself at the end of his proem.

In place of the subtle critique exercised by Herodotos on the political use of myth, Aristophanes offers parody. Whether this is a parody of the mythical abduction stories as told by Herodotos (if so, the poet comically associates the two great wars on the level of causes) is a matter of dispute which relates to the vexed issue of the publication date of the *Histories*.[13] Nevertheless, both content and phrasing of the Aristophanic passage leave room for the possibility that the poet draws directly on traditional myth (the abduction of Helen as the reason for the Trojan war, myths of abduction of other women).[14] Aristophanes goes a step further and satirises the political use of a traditional mythical story (which dates back to Homer), and thus by extension the way in which mythical abduction stories are enlisted in the effort to explain political developments. Aspasia and Megara are of course connected with Perikles (mentioned at *Ach.* 530 as "Olympian Perikles"), who was seen by the Athenian people as responsible for the war,[15] and who was

[13] On this issue see C. W. Fornara, "Evidence for the Date of Herodotus' Publication," *JHS* 91 (1971) 25–34, who argues convincingly that a date prior to *Acharnians* is unsustainable; cf. D. Asheri et al., *A Commentary on Herodotus Books I–IV* (Oxford/New York 2007) 74. It has been argued, however, that Herodotos read his stories publicly, in which case knowledge of the proem would not have to depend on publication; see e.g. E. J. Bakker, "The Making of History: Herodotus' *Historiês Apodexis*," in *Brill's Companion to Herodotus* (Leiden 2002) 8–9.

[14] Asheri et al., *Commentary* 74. An alternative explanation of the passage as an allusion to a real scandal comically connected by the poet with the Peloponnesian war is logically possible, but unnecessary and lacks evidence (cf. Fornara, *JHS* 91 [1971] 28; C. B. R. Pelling, *Literary Texts and the Greek Historian* [London 2000] 151–154).

[15] Thuc. 2.21.3; 1.140–144 on his insistence on the Megarian decree, which was considered by the Athenians to be one of the main causes of the war. Cf. Pelling, *Literary Texts* 151–152. For an analysis of Aristophanes'

repeatedly thus presented in comedy (530 ff., cf. *Peace* 605–609).[16] In suggesting a comic connection between Perikles and myth (Aspasia is mentioned in the context of abductions), Aristophanes was not alone: it is widely assumed that in his *Dionysalexandros* (as suggested by the comedy's *hypothesis*), Kratinos makes use of the Trojan myth as an allegory for the outbreak of either the Peloponnesian or the Samian war, which he blames on Perikles;[17] in Eupolis' *Prospaltioi* (fr.267), Aspasia is called Helen. Even if Aristophanes is imitating Kratinos, both poets' satire may reflect Athenian politics and the methods employed by Perikles' real-life opponents, who presumably used mythical *exempla* to support their attack on his pro-war attitude (this is mirrored in comedy's attacks on Perikles, some of which are reported by Plutarch (e.g. *Per.* 33.6–7, quoting Hermippos fr.47).

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view of Perikles as metacomic satire see now K. Sidwell, *Aristophanes the Democrat: The Politics of Satirical Comedy during the Peloponnesian War* (Cambridge/ New York 2009) 147–154.

[16] The version of events provided by Hermes in this passage (that Perikles started the war in order to divert attention from the possibility of his implication in Pheidias' embezzlement of public materials during his work on the Parthenon) is pure fiction, but was surprisingly adopted by historians (Ephoros *FGrHist* 70 F 196, Philochoros *FGrHist* 328 F 121, Diod. 12.39). See also S. D. Olson, *Aristophanes: Peace* (Oxford/New York 1998) 196–197.

[17] F. Casolari, *Die Mythentravestie in der griechischen Komödie* (Muenster 2003) 98–109; M. Wright, "Comedy and the Trojan War," *CQ* 57 (2007) 419–421. For a different reading see E. Bakola, *Cratinus and the Art of Comedy* (Oxford/ New York 2010) 181–208, who doubts that the political dimension is the "main essence" of the play (but accepts that satire of Perikles may be prominent at certain moments); cf. I. Storey, "On First Looking into Kratinos' *Dionysalexandros*," in L. Kozek and J. Rich (eds.), *Playing around Aristophanes* (Oxford 2006) 116–110, who sees the play as "essentially a burlesque of myth and not a political comedy." Scholars traditionally associate *Dionysalexandros* with the Peloponnesian War (cf. Bakola 300 n.27), but see H. B. Mattingly, "Poets and Politicians in Fifth-century Greece," in K. H. Kinzl (ed.), *Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean in Ancient History and Prehistory* (Berlin/New York 1977) 243–244, and Storey 113–116, 124, who defend an earlier date (437), connecting the play with the Samian War.

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Mythical abductions of women as a cause of war may be a momentary joke in the context where they belong, but the satire of political myth elsewhere in the play offers structural elements and acquires a dramatic function. In fact, this form of satire is often embedded in comic plots (as the section on *Birds* below will also demonstrate).

Early in the play, Dikaiopolis is seeking a way to make a truce with Sparta, but the Athenian Assembly will have none of it. At that moment a certain Amphitheos shows up (46–52):

KH.   τίς ἀγορεύειν βούλεται;
AM.   ἐγώ.
KH.   τίς ὤν;
AM.   Ἀμφίθεος.
KH.   οὐκ ἄνθρωπος;
AM.   οὔ,
        ἀλλ᾽ ἀθάνατος. ὁ γὰρ Ἀμφίθεος Δήμητρος ἦν
        καὶ Τριπτολέμου· τούτου δὲ Κελεὸς γίγνεται·
        γαμεῖ δὲ Κελεὸς Φαιναρέτην τήθην ἐμήν,
        ἐξ ἧς Λυκῖνος ἐγένετ᾽· ἐκ τούτου δ᾽ ἐγώ
        ἀθάνατός εἰμ᾽· ἐμοὶ δ᾽ ἐπέτρεψαν οἱ θεοὶ
        σπονδὰς ποιῆσαι πρὸς Λακεδαιμονίους μόνῳ.

Amphitheos wishes to speak to the Assembly, and the Herald asks him to introduce himself, which he promptly does by announcing his name (Ἀμφίθεος = god on both sides)[18] and claiming that he is not human but immortal: his great grand-father Amphitheos was a son of Demeter and Triptolemos, and father of Keleos; Keleos and Phainarete produced a son, Lykinos, the father of our Amphitheos. In mythology, Keleos was king of Eleusis (*Hymn.Hom.Cer.* 153–155, 475); he was deposed by Triptolemos[19] or he was the father of Triptolemos,[20] to

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[18] On the name, a strong supporting element of the underlying satire, see now N. Kanavou, *Aristophanes' Comedy of Names: A Study of Speaking Names in Aristophanes* (Berlin/New York 2011) 30–32.

[19] According to Philochoros, *FGrHist* 328 F 104.

[20] According to later sources (Paus. 1.14.2–3). Aristophanes inverts this

whom Demeter taught agriculture. Aristophanes mixes these names from Eleusinian mythology with Athenian names (Phainarete was the name of Sokrates' mother, and Lykinos a common name, reminiscent of the Lykeion). The merging of Eleusinian mythology with an allusion to a real Athenian may be viewed as syncretism on a comic level: Eleusis, though attached to Athens, had a range of local traditions and reputedly was once involved in war with Athens (this tradition, though of uncertain historical basis, was quite vivid in the classical period).[21] The Eleusinian war clearly ended with Eleusis' subjection to Athens, but traditional stories bear testimony to Eleusis' integration with Athens (e.g. the introduction of free meals at the Athenian Prytaneion by Keleos, Plut. *Mor.* 667D), and the Eleusinian mysteries were an integral part of Athenian religion.[22] It is perhaps no coincidence that the comic hero who will attempt to make peace between the two main opponents in the Peloponnesian War is himself the product of the union between two sides which (at least in poetry) were once hostile.

Amphitheos' self-introduction further constitutes a comic genealogy, by means of which the hero expects to raise his status before speaking in favour of peace, so that his opinion may influence as much as possible the pro-war (therefore hostile to him) Assembly—much like the Homeric heroes who present their genealogies before battle in an attempt to impress or intimidate their enemies.[23] Aristophanes thus satirises a

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relationship, cf. S. D. Olson, *Aristophanes: Acharnians* (Oxford/New York 2002) 85–86. On Triptolemos see further R. Parker, *Athenian Religion: A History* (Oxford 1996) 98–101, with bibliography.

[21] Cf. Thuc. 2.15, Eur. *Erechtheus*; a late source is Paus. 1.27.4. On the Eleusinian war (which was attributed to Erechtheus) see Kearns, *Heroes* 113–115.

[22] The cult of Eleusinian Demeter is commonly believed to have been independent originally, but see Parker (*Athenian Religion* 97–101) on the uncertainty of this view.

[23] For example, the genealogy of Aineias is recited just as the hero is about to face Achilles in combat (*Il.* 5.247–248). On the Homeric use of genealogy see M. Alden, *Homer beside Himself: Paranarratives in the Iliad* (Ox-

known habit in the use of myth—a habit that is familiar to us also from pure genealogical poetry, which satisfies the need of cities and phratries to build or alter their history.[24] This is a practice that numerous Athenian families (especially the noble *gene*) seem to have followed in order to link themselves with heroes or gods.[25] The element *theos* in Amphitheos' name may also hide satire against a real Athenian family which possibly sought to glorify itself through divine-related names: an inscription (*IG* II² 2343.3) mentions some members of a *thiasos* of Herakles based at Kydathenaion, among whom an Amphitheos and an Antitheos (two brothers?).[26]

A little later in the play (128 ff.), Amphitheos becomes a peace negotiator, as Dikaiopolis is persuaded to trust him with the task of making his private truce with Sparta. Aristophanes' audience would see in Amphitheos' mythical associations,

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ford 2000) 153–178.

[24] Cf. Graf, *Greek Mythology* 128–131. The poetry of Eumelos of Korinth is a known example; see M. L. West, *Greek Epic Fragments* (Cambridge [Mass.] 2003) 26–27. There is also genealogical prose, notably the writings of the Athenian Pherekydes (*FGrHist* 3; R. L. Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography* I [Oxford 2000] 272–364). Famously, Hekataios claimed in his *Genealogies* that his family had divine origin (Hdt. 2.143 = *FGrHist* 1 T 4).

[25] This tendency was strongly related to Greek religious belief: noble families often claimed descent from heroes, and assumed sacral functions (e.g. the illustrious *genos* of Eteoboutadai, the descendants of the hero Boutes, held the priesthood of Athena Polias). See Parker, *Athenian Religion* 58–62, and R. Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (Cambridge 1989) 156–160. One wonders whether broader religious satire is intended: after all, each tribe had a hero founder, and eponymous tribal heroes received cult.

[26] Members of the same family often received names with a common component, see e.g. Kanavou, *Aristophanes' Comedy of Names* 2 n.5. On the (rather problematic) issue of the identification of Amphitheos and Antitheos (this name too is found in Aristophanes: *Thesm.* 898) with real individuals, see Sidwell, *Aristophanes the Democrat* 135–136, 274 (who would rather see in Amphitheos an allusion to the god Hermes' role in Kratinos' *Dionysalexandros*). Even if accepted, this identification would arguably not exhaust the comic potential implied by the hero's name and dramatic function.

which are satirically presented, a comic incentive for specific action.[27] Real-life experience increases this possibility: the expression of political issues and relations in genealogical terms is often followed by specific historical acts. For example, the Spartans are known to have used mythical models to justify their expansionism in the Peloponnese in the sixth century; one such model was the revival of an old tradition that linked Agamemnon with Sparta.[28] Herodotos tells us (1.67–68) that in the middle of that century, the Spartans claimed to have found Orestes' bones buried at Tegea in Arcadia and transported them with solemnity to Sparta. It was common belief that the heroes' bones protect the land where they are buried. Herodotos says that as a result of the relocation of the bones, the Spartans began to win battles against the Tegeans, even though they were defeated earlier, and quickly subdued the largest part of the Peloponnese (κατὰ μὲν δὴ τὸν πρότερον πόλεμον συνεχέως ἀιεὶ κακῶς ἀέθλεον πρὸς τοὺς Τεγεήτας ... καὶ ἀπὸ τούτου τοῦ χρόνου, ὅκως πειρῴατο ἀλλήλων, πολλῷ κατυπέρτεροι τῷ πολέμῳ ἐγίνοντο οἱ Λακεδαιμόνιοι· ἤδη δέ σφι καὶ ἡ πολλὴ τῆς Πελοποννήσου ἦν κατεστραμμένη).

In the case of both the comic Amphitheos and the historical Spartans, political myth is presented to move the action forward: this translates into dramatic effect in the case of comedy, and into important political development in the case of the historical Spartans. The "serious" tone of the genealogical account given by Amphitheos may be paralleled with the solemnity of the transfer of the bones.

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[27] The assertion of Amphitheos' mythic descent (46–52) does not have an immediate effect: he is ousted from the Assembly and manhandled by the Scythian policemen, 54–56. This is reminiscent of Spartan defeat before the introduction of the mythical factor (see below). His initial failure at the Assembly may imply derision of the genealogical claim (cf. 55), but the later emergence of this "divine" character as a key figure in the plot satirically reinstates the traditional political use of genealogy.

[28] See Hall, in *Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology* 333–336; K. Dowden, *The Uses of Greek Mythology* (London 1992) 91.

Birds

Satire of political myth is arguably involved in the plot of *Birds*. In 466–470, Peisetairos tries to persuade the birds of their cosmic importance by presenting them with a comic account of a supposed mythical past:

ΠΕ.   οὕτως ὑμῶν ὑπεραλγῶ,
         οἵτινες ὄντες πρότερον βασιλῆς–
ΧΟ.   ἡμεῖς βασιλῆς; τίνος;
ΠΕ.   ὑμεῖς
         πάντων ὁπόσ᾽ ἔστιν, ἐμοῦ πρῶτον, τουδί, καὶ τοῦ Διὸς
            αὑτοῦ,
         ἀρχαιότεροι πρότεροί τε Κρόνου καὶ Τιτάνων ἐγένεσθε
         καὶ Γῆς.
ΧΟ.   καὶ Γῆς;
ΠΕ.   νὴ τὸν Ἀπόλλω.

In Peisetairos' words, the birds used to be absolute kings, not just of all humans, but of Zeus himself, and were born before Kronos and the Titans and even before the Earth. Once convinced, the birds adopt this mythology in the parabasis (693–703):

Χάος ἦν καὶ Νὺξ Ἔρεβός τε μέλαν πρῶτον καὶ Τάρταρος
         εὐρύς·
γῆ δ᾽ οὐδ᾽ ἀὴρ οὐδ᾽ οὐρανὸς ἦν· Ἐρέβους δ᾽ ἐν ἀπείροσι
         κόλποις
τίκτει πρώτιστον ὑπηνέμιον Νὺξ ἡ μελανόπτερος ᾠόν,
ἐξ οὗ περιτελλομέναις ὥραις ἔβλαστεν Ἔρως ὁ ποθεινός,
στίλβων νῶτον πτερύγοιν χρυσαῖν, εἰκὼς ἀνεμώκεσι δίναις.
οὗτος δὲ Χάει πτερόεντι μιγεὶς μύχιος κατὰ Τάρταρον εὐρὺν
ἐνεόττευσεν γένος ἡμέτερον, καὶ πρῶτον ἀνήγαγεν εἰς φῶς.
πρότερον δ᾽ οὐκ ἦν γένος ἀθανάτων, πρὶν Ἔρως ξυνέμειξεν
         ἅπαντα·
ξυμμειγνυμένων δ᾽ ἑτέρων ἑτέροις γένετ᾽ Οὐρανὸς Ὠκεανός τε
καὶ Γῆ πάντων τε θεῶν μακάρων γένος ἄφθιτον. ὧδε μέν ἐσμεν
πολὺ πρεσβύτατοι πάντων μακάρων ἡμεῖς.

In this song, sung by the bird-chorus, we hear that Chaos and Night and black Erebos (Darkness) and Tartaros were the

first beings. Then Night laid an egg, which is suitable for an ornithological genealogy; out of the egg came Eros, a winged (therefore bird-related) being, who consorted with Chaos, also winged, and thus the race of birds came to be. Subsequent sexual unions led to the birth of Ouranos, the Ocean, the Earth and the immortal gods. Hence the birds are more ancient than the gods.

Parody of Hesiod, Orphic poetry, and presocratic philosophy is usually detected here.[29] At the same time, however, the mythic bird-genealogy satirises traditional genealogies for their habit of leading back to the "first man" or progenitor: the famous example is from the *Catalogue of Women*: Deukalion, son of Prometheus, who restarted mankind (after a flood or other disaster), as well as the first Greek, Hellen, son of Deukalion.[30] The ornithological genealogy takes us to the "first bird," but in a comically exaggerated way: whereas the progenitor of the human race is (at most) near the gods (as a son of Prometheus), the first bird is more ancient than these!

Furthermore, as in the case of Amphitheos, mythic genealogy promotes comic action by raising the status of the play's winged characters. After the mythic confirmation of their antiquity and importance, the birds proceed to found a city, a city that will have power over both gods and humans: the relevant proposal is first made and discussed during the agon (550 ff.—*after* Peisetairos introduced the subject of the birds'

[29] E.g. N. V. Dunbar, *Aristophanes: Birds* (Oxford 1995) 437–447; H. Hofmann, *Mythos und Komödie: Untersuchungen zu den Vögeln des Aristophanes* (Hildesheim/New York 1976) 177–196. C. Moulton, "Comic Myth-Making and Aristophanes' Originality," in E. Segal (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Aristophanes* (Oxford/New York 1996) 216–228, at 220–223, stresses the intertextual character of the parabasis.

[30] Fr.2 M.-W. The *Catalogue* must be the source of the story of mankind's creation from Deukalion's stones, which is attested in the Hesiodic corpus (fr.234; cf. Pind. *Ol.* 9.43–45, Akousilas *FGrHist* 2 F 35 = Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography* 23). On the sources of the Deukalion myth see M. Hirschberger, *Gynaikon Katalogos und Megalai Ehoiai: ein Kommentar* (Munich/Leipzig 2004) 172–176.

superiority at 466–470), and the new city is named and in-augurated immediately after the parabasis (801 ff.). A further potential object of parody suggests itself here: the *ktiseis*, narrative stories about the foundation of cities, which (like genealogical narratives) were popular at the end of the fifth century (cf. Pl. *Hp.Mai.* 285D–E). But the satirical target is not limited to literary sources and models. Aristophanes satirises the use of genealogy as an argument that promotes the recraft-ing of the world of the birds into a leading city, and thus derides the psychological process which consolidates political claims and forms collective identities.

Identity is a product of oppositions that mix myth and history. For example, the reception of the Greco-Persian war in the classical period contributed to the consolidation of the Greek national identity and to the emergence of the diptych "Hellene-barbarian" (through which non-Greek neighbours even far removed in history, like the Trojans, came to be viewed).[31] Similarly the birds are defined as a homogeneous race through their opposition with the *other*, who in this case are all humans and all gods.

In addition to proving their genealogical seniority, the hero secures the status of birds as a distinct and superior group through "evidence" which supports their ancient claim to actual kingship over humans, a claim that is more ancient than the gods' (481–485):

ὡς δ᾽ οὐχὶ θεοὶ τοίνυν ἦρχον τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὸ παλαιόν,
ἀλλ᾽ ὄρνιθες, κἀβασίλευον, πόλλ᾽ ἐστὶ τεκμήρια τούτων.
αὐτίκα δ᾽ ὑμῖν πρῶτ᾽ ἐπιδείξω τὸν ἀλεκτρυόν᾽, ὡς ἐτυράννει
ἦρχέ τε Περσῶν πρότερον πολλῷ Δαρείου καὶ Μεγαβάζου,
ὥστε καλεῖται Περσικὸς ὄρνις ἀπὸ τῆς ἀρχῆς ἔτ᾽ ἐκείνης.

In Peisetairos' words, the bird ἀλεκτρυών is also called Περσι-

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[31] On the "orientalisation" of Trojans (who were depicted in terms sim-ilar to the Greeks in the *Iliad*) in the fifth century see Hall, in *Cambridge Com-panion to Greek Mythology* 346–350, with bibliography. A characteristic example is the equating of Trojans with barbarians in Euripides' *Andromache* (173–176, 243, 261, 649, 665).

κὸς ὄρνις (Persian bird) because he was the first king of the Persians, which serves as confirmation of the birds' right to rule the world. This claim may be satire of yet another type of political use of myth: the notion and function of eponymous heroes. Heroes were often invented and named to explain names of nations and cities.[32] In the ancient view, however, it was the toponyms that were derived from the ancestral heroes; the relevant mythological material was used as an argument in political claims.[33] The ἀλεκτρυών is comically made part of precisely such an argument; additionally, his appellation "Persian bird" suggests a comic inversion of the traditional view of the origin of the eponymous hero's name: an eponymous hero was thought to have *given* his name to the country with which he is associated, but the bird who first ruled over Persia is said to have *taken* his name from the country.

The consolidation of the identity of the birds in opposition to humans and gods is used by Peisetairos as a fundamental persuasive tool for founding the new bird-city. The part of the comic hero Peisetairos in the reorganisation of the world of the birds makes him seem satirically relevant to a particular mythic figure of special Athenian interest. It is very likely that the organisation and the ambitions of the bird-city would remind the Athenian audience of the unification and the subsequent potential for power of their own city. In uniting the various previously scattered bird species[34] into a single bird-city (μίαν πόλιν: 172, 550), Peisetairos appears as a comic version of Theseus, who in the traditional view (as early as Thuc. 2.15) implemented the *synoikismos*, the unification of the small independent towns of Attica into a coherent whole,[35] and thus

[32] See e.g. Thomas, *Oral Tradition* 176. For a list of eponymous heroes see L. R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford 1921) 413–418.

[33] Cf. the case of Ion, founder of Ionia (see n.10 above).

[34] The birds' original state of dispersion is reflected in the gathering of chorus members at 263 ff.: the various bird species that are to form the play's chorus have to be summoned from different places (cf. 201 ff.).

[35] Thucydides tells us that under Theseus Attic demes ceased to have in-

made possible the rise of Athenian power. This is a clear example of political mythology, conceived to underscore Athenian identity.[36] Theseus had not always been part of Athenian memory, as he is known to us from the fifth century. His function was upgraded and the relevant myths were altered in the sixth century, so that Athens might acquire her own local hero (parallel to Herakles for the Dorians), to add prestige to her historical past.[37] This is further shown by the hero's iconography, which underwent significant change at that time: on Attic red-figure vases Theseus is depicted wearing a crown, along with Aigeus holding a sceptre, the symbol of the kingship to be inherited by the hero.[38] Additionally, Theseus' bones were transferred from Skyros to Athens (Paus. 3.3.7), which he would henceforth protect.

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dependent magistracies, and that he established one common Bouleuterion and one Prytaneion.

[36] Cf. R. Parker, "Myths of Early Athens," in J. Bremmer (ed.), *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (London 1987) 187–214, who notes (187) that Attic mythology is primarily of political character and relates to the *city*, unlike other Greek myths which treat more universal themes (e.g. the Oidipus myth). Theseus is the best-known example, but a political function is also inherent in early Athenian myths which were adjusted to promote the concept of Athenian autochthony (see below). The greatest festival in Athenian religion, the Panathenaia, celebrated social unity and order (Parker 192–195).

[37] Until then Theseus does not seem to have had particular Attic connections; in the archaic period he was chiefly known as an abductor of women (Helen, Ariadne, Persephone), centaur fighter (*Il.* 1.265, [Hes.] *Sc.* 182), and killer of the Minotaur: H. J. Walker, *Theseus and Athens* (Oxford 1995) 15–20. Even if his roots lie in Attica (as Walker argues, esp. 13–15), a political significance for him was only conceived at a later stage. The rise of Theseus is an issue fraught with complexities which lie outside the scope of the present study, but see Kearns, *Heroes* 117, with bibliography.

[38] Older iconographical themes involving Theseus include the abduction of Helen (on vases from the seventh century); his early iconography suggests a panhellenic hero (cf. Walker, *Theseus* 20). The most popular theme in his iconography overall is his fight with the Minotaur: S. Woodford, "Theseus," *LIMC* VII (1994) 940–943, nos. 228–263.

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It is further important that Theseus, according to Plutarch, achieved the *synoikismos* using persuasion (πειθώ)—precisely the way in which Peisetairos, who has persuasion in his name, imposed his plan on the birds:[39]

ἐπιὼν οὖν <u>ἔπειθε</u> κατὰ δήμους καὶ γένη, τῶν μὲν ἰδιωτῶν καὶ πενήτων ἐνδεχομένων ταχὺ τὴν παράκλησιν αὐτοῦ, τοῖς δὲ δυνατοῖς ἀβασίλευτον πολιτείαν προτείνων καὶ δημοκρατίαν, αὐτῷ μόνον ἄρχοντι πολέμου καὶ νόμων φύλακι χρησομένην, τῶν δ' ἄλλων παρέξουσαν ἅπασιν ἰσομοιρίαν, τοὺς μὲν ταῦτ' <u>ἔπειθεν</u>, οἱ δὲ τὴν δύναμιν αὐτοῦ δεδιότες, μεγάλην οὖσαν ἤδη, καὶ τὴν τόλμαν, ἐβούλοντο <u>πειθόμενοι</u> μᾶλλον ἢ βιαζόμενοι ταῦτα συγχωρεῖν.

The rise of Theseus to the role of organiser of the Athenian political past was complemented by the inauguration of cults and festivals.[40] In a similar manner, in the comic universe the foundation of the bird-city leads to the deification of its architect Peisetairos at the end of the play (1706), when we hear that he is about to receive Zeus' thunderbolt.

Some further details of the comedy's plot may point to Theseus. Both heroes encounter initial opposition: Peisetairos fights a battle with the birds, who are at first unable to comprehend (or trust) his plan; Theseus struggles with the Pallantidai and overcomes them (Plut. *Thes.* 13.2–3; 24). The unwanted

[39] *Thes.* 24. Plutarch's source for Theseus' life and deeds must be the Atthidographers (the introduction to the *Theseus* expresses dislike for poetic myth); he cites some names, most frequently Hellanikos (five times: *FGrHist* 4 F 164–168; 323a F 14–18; Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography* 164–168), who undoubtedly recorded the *synoikismos*, and Philochoros (seven times: *FGrHist* 328 F 17a–18a, 109–112; F 94 on the *synoikismos*). See Walker, *Theseus* 201; C. Ampolo, *Plutarco: le vite di Teseo e di Romolo* (Milan 1988) xlv–lii; P. Harding, *The Story of Athens: The Fragments of the Local Chronicles of Attica* (London 2008) 52–72, for an overview of the atthidographic sources. The earliest historiographical source of a Theseus story must be Pherekydes.

[40] He had his own festival, the Theseia; another, the Oschophoria, was related to his adventure in Crete, where he was able to kill the Minotaur and stop the annual sacrifice of Athenian youths and maidens. See Walker, *Theseus* 20–24.

visitors to the bird-city are driven away by Peisetairos, who thus protects the new city's integrity; Theseus annihilates the dangerous figures he meets on his way to Athens, thus purifying the area that surrounds the city which he is about to reform.[41] The song of the Poet for Cloudcuckooland belongs to the tradition of hymnical songs to cities—a tradition followed in the odes of Pindar and satirised here. Noticeably, in the song of this Pindaric poet[42] it is not only the city that receives praise, but also its founder, who is called κτίστωρ (924–930):

> ἀλλά τις ὠκεῖα Μουσάων φάτις
> οἷάπερ ἵππων ἀμαρυγά.
> σὺ δὲ πάτερ, κτίστορ Αἴτνας,
> ζαθέων ἱερῶν ὁμώνυμε,
> δὸς ἐμὶν ὅ τι περ τεᾷ κεφαλᾷ θέλῃς
> πρόφρων δόμεν {ἐμὶν τεΐν}.

This is an obvious satire of a Pindaric poem in honour of Hieron, where the honorand is called κτίστορ Αἴτνας, founder of the city of Aitna (fr.105a.3). Theseus too was honoured by a variety of epic songs from the sixth century on, known as *Theseids* (this tradition is mentioned by Aristotle, *Poet.* 1451a16–22, cf. Plut. *Thes.* 28.1). Attic tragedy (Soph. *OC*, Eur. *Supp.*, *HF*) portrayed Theseus as the founder of Athenian democracy (also as a humane ruler and protector of the weak).[43] He was of

[41] There is a notable difference: unwanted visitors *come* to Peisetairos, while Theseus *encounters* the criminals on his way. This may be explained by the limitations of dramatic space and by the different order of events: Cloudcuckooland is already established when visitors appear, while the destruction of criminals by Theseus precedes the *synoikismos*.

[42] On this passage (and on the possibility that the poet is meant as mockery of Euripides as encomiast of Alkibiades in his epinician ode) see recently D. G. Smith, "Alcibiades, Athens, and the Tyranny of Sicily," *GRBS* 49 (2009) 363–389, at 371–379 and 384–387.

[43] See Kearns, *Heroes* 119, for references. Thucydides (2.15) claims that he performed the *synoikismos* while remaining a monarch. But he was not to be seen as an absolute monarch, as Soph. *OC* 916–917 suggests (the city is not his slave, but a free city; cf. Eur. *Supp.* 406–408).

course not the city's founder (the Athenians took pride in their autochthony),[44] and was therefore not honoured as a *ktistor*; but he still received praise as a hero who made a fundamental contribution to the organisation of the city he protects; *synoikismos* takes the place of *oikismos*.[45]

Theseus is not the only mythic figure to share similarities with Peisetairos. Other potential mythic targets are worth considering, and early Athenian mythology is again the place to look. Kekrops, the archetypal ancestral king of the Athenians, was described, like Theseus, as a civiliser who established the first Attic cities (the *Dodekapolis*, the twelve cities) and introduced a number of essential customs, including monogamous marriage, funeral rites, and writing.[46] Kekrops' function as a stabiliser is further reflected in stories that present him as a witness or judge in the traditional contest between Athena and Poseidon for Attica (Xen. *Mem.* 3.5.10). Peisetairos' acquired 'animalistic' side (801 ff., he appears ἐπτερωμένος "winged") may have reminded some among the audience of Kekrops, who was described as half-man, half-snake[47] (this association is somewhat hindered, though not altogether invalidated, by the

[44] A central idea in their view of themselves, see Kearns, *Heroes* 110–112; Parker, in *Interpretations* 187–214.

[45] As Kearns notes, *Heroes* 112.

[46] This concept of the hero is not, however, attested before the fourth century: see Parker, in *Interpretations* 197–198, citing Philochoros (*FGrHist* 328 F 94–98) as the earliest certain mythographical source. Kekrops prefigures the role of Theseus. Cf. Kearns, *Heroes* 113.

[47] To express his autochthonous nature (he was believed to have sprung from the earth); he was thus depicted on Attic red-figure vases (cf. Eur. *Ion* 1163–1164, Ar. *Vesp.* 438). See Kearns, *Heroes* 111; Parker, in *Interpretations* 193. Kekrops was thought to be the first Athenian king (Thuc. 2.15.1), and to have been succeeded by Erichthonios/Erechtheus who also emerged from the earth (cf. *Il.* 2.547–549; but see Parker 200 on other early kings and the scattered nature of the relevant traditions). The Athenians were sometimes called "Kekropids" (*Birds* contain a relevant joke, 1407 Κρεκοπίδα φυλή, on which see Kanavou, *Aristophanes' Comedy of Names* 120–121) or "Erechtheids."

fact that it invokes two different animals). Admittedly, however, Theseus' much more striking association with a political role and his prominence in Athenian arts and festivals make a him a more likely target of satire than Kekrops, or indeed any other early Athenian mythological figure.[48] The parallelism between Theseus and the comic hero is not exact, but it is suggestive.[49]

The comic plot elements and jokes presented above may form part of varied contexts within two different Aristophanic plays, but they have a common basis (like jokes based on the satire of women or of sophists). The common basis here is the satire of the political use of myth. As noted at the start, comic myth is put at the service of satire, hence this type of use of myth suggests another form of comic satire. Awareness of this form of satire in *Acharnians* and *Birds* brings significant gains: it enhances our view of the plays' political aspect and of the satirical techniques used; and it provides new clues to the conception of certain comic heroes and lines of comic action.[50]

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[48] Such as Erichthonios, also depicted in snake form, who was credited with the introduction of the Panathenaia; or Pandion, who established the four-fold division of Attica as well as the Pandia (Kearns, *Heroes* 110, 112, 115).

[49] Outside of the comic context, Theseus has been paralleled with Kleisthenes and Kimon (Kearns, *Heroes* 117–119).