GROUP LAUGHTER AND COMIC AFFIRMATION: ARISTOPHANES' *BIRDS* AND THE POLITICAL FUNCTION OF OLD COMEDY *

There has been much discussion concerning the question of what may have been the social/political function of Old Comedy in classical Athens.[1] First, I will try to hint at a possible answer by looking at Aristophanes' *Birds* (staged in 414 BC); second, I will provide an answer by generalizing my impressions. Admittedly, the value of any generalizing on topics like these is limited by the fact that, of the approximately 650 comedies which were staged in 5th-century Athens,[2] only eleven are extant.

Before turning to the actual plays, we should inquire about the primary audience of 5th century drama at Athens. Though we certainly do not know much about it, the following conclusions drawn from the scarce evidence seem plausible: (a) Since the theatre of Dionysus in which *Birds* was staged in 414 may have held up to 15 000 spectators,[3] this was the largest regular congregation of Athenian citizens.[4] As the polis of Athens at this date had approximately 30 000 citizens, nearly half of the body politic in Athens watched a given drama. (b) Since we know that there was an admission fee which was rather high (two oboles per person each day, i. e. two thirds of a working day's wages), we may conclude that this fee must have affected the attendance in a socially significant way. Therefore, a poet like Aristophanes

* This text was written at the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton) late in 2003 and revised at Penn State in 2005. With gratitude, I acknowledge the help and criticism of Dan Berman, Veit Elm, Michael Frede, Dave Lunt and Dmitri Panchenko.

[1] See Ch. Mann, "Aristophanes, Kleon und eine angebliche Zäsur in der Geschichte Athens", in: A. Ercolani (ed.), *Spoudaiogeloion. Form und Funktion der Verspottung in der aristophanischen Komödie* (Stuttgart – Weimar 2002) 105 ff.

[2] Cf. R. Kannicht in J. Henderson, "Attic Old Comedy, Frank Speech, and Democracy", in: D. Boedeker, K. A. Raaflaub (eds.), *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens* (Cambridge, Mass.– London 1998) 255.

[3] No exact numbers are known: cf. A. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens.* 2nd ed. rev. by J. Gould, D. M. Lewis (Oxford 1988 [1968]) 263.

[4] Ch. Meier, "Zur Funktion der Feste in Athen im 5. Jahrhundert vor Christus", in: W. Haug, R. Warning (eds.), *Das Fest* (München 1989) 582; cf. Henderson (n. 2) 268; K.-W. Welwei, *Das klassische Athen. Demokratie und Machtpolitik im 5. und 4. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt 1999) 112.

would have expected to meet up to 15 000 Athenians at the theater who, taken as a whole, since they were willing to spend this money must have been better off than the average citizen.[5] A large proportion of them must have been Zeugites.[6] Admittedly, at some point visiting the theatre became funded, but this appears to have been a development of 4th century Athens.[7] During the 5th century, then, the audience was *not* a selection of Athenians which was socially representative of the citizen body that gathered at the *ekklesia* (this notion has been a dogma in the 'political' interpretation of tragedy for quite some time).[8] Rather, it was dominated by the comparably well-off. Obviously, this is nothing but a rough approximation of the audience's social structure. (c) As were the festivals as a whole, the dramatic competitions were publicly funded and publicly controlled. (d) The poets participated with the intention to win the dramatic contest.[9] Admittedly, the victory depended on the vote of a jury; but this jury usually is assumed to have awarded the victory according to the reactions of the audience during the performances [10] (thus, Aristophanean parabases usually appeal to the whole of the audience). In order to win, then, the poet had to reckon upon the favorable reactions of a clear majority of approximately 10 000–15 000 Athenians.

1. ARISTOPHANES' *BIRDS*

The function of Old Comedy has usually been described as *critical*, i. e. as aiming at the exposure of some intolerable state of public life or political affairs with the intent to change it.[11] Without denying some critical elements

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[5] See A. H. Sommerstein, "The Theatre Audience, the Demos, and the Suppliants of Aeschylus", in: Ch. Pelling (ed.), *Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford 1997) 64–68, 72.

[6] As for the Zeugites cf. M. Landfester, "Aristophanes und die politische Krise Athens", in: G. Alföldy e. a. (eds.), *Krisen in der Antike* (Düsseldorf 1975) 30.

[7] See E. Ruschenbusch, "Die Einführung des Theorikon", *ZPE* 36 (1979) 303–308; P. J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia* (Oxford 1993 [1981]) 490–493 on *Ath. Pol*. 41. 3; Welwei (n. 4) 426 n. 238.

[8] Since V. Ehrenberg, *Aristophanes und das Volk von Athen. Eine Soziologie der altattischen Komödie* (Zürich – Stuttgart [3]1968 [1962]) 34.

[9] As has been already argued by Wieland and Wilhelm von Humboldt, cf. M. Holtermann, *Der deutsche Aristophanes. Die Rezeption eines politischen Dichters im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen 2004) 87 ff.

[10] Cf., e. g., fr. adesp. 139 (vol. 8 *PCG*): αἰσχρὸν δὲ κρίνειν τὰ καλὰ τῶν πολλῶν ψόφῳ.

[11] Cf. Ehrenberg (n. 8) 16; Holtermann (n. 9) 40 ff. I use the term "critical" to describe the intention to criticize and eventually change an established institution, "af-

in Old Comedy the analysis of *Birds* which is to follow aims at demonstrating that there are important *affirmative* elements, too, which till now have been neglected.

Birds was produced at the City Dionysia of 414 BC, which implies that it was written and rehearsed some time during the year before. Quite obviously, the most important political issue of the time was the Sicilian expedition. Therefore, for at least the past 150 years, most scholars have tried to understand *Birds* in terms of this expedition, of the political strife associated with its beginning and of its disastrous failure. But, although Thucydides' report may loom large in every modern reader's mind, we should try to keep the historical order of events in mind: [12] In March of 414, when *Birds* was staged, the allied troops were preparing to march in the direction of Syracuse in order to besiege the city. As we know from Thucydides, Nicias failed utterly: hardly any of his soldiers survived. But it has to be pointed out that during the time of the City Dionysia nobody would have been able to foresee the expedition's doom. The allied forces were not retreating before autumn 414, half a year *after Birds* was staged. The expedition's fatal failure was not realized at Athens until late summer in 413. We may assume, then, that everybody may have been eagerly waiting for news from Sicily, but certainly there was no reason to be pessimistic.[13]

Now, at first glance, in *Birds* Aristophanes appears to have alluded to contemporary politics much less than he did in his other plays. *Birds* is the only Aristophanean comedy transmitted to us whose setting is *prima facie* not to be located at Athens but in a world of fiction: Guided by an emigrated Athenian, Peisetaerus, the birds seize power by fencing off the air and, eventually, supersede the Olympic gods. Peisetaerus is made king of the new world-order by marrying *Basíleia* who formerly had granted Zeus' power.[14] As is often the case, this comedy ends with a festival celebrating victory, wedding and the dawn of utopian bliss.

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firmative" to describe the intention to stabilize it. Cf., e. g., Th. W. Adorno, "Kritik" [1969], in: *Gesammelte Schriften* X. 2nd ed. by R. Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main 1997) 785–793; H. Marcuse, "Über den affirmativen Charakter der Kultur" [1937], in: *Schriften* III (Frankfurt am Main 1979) 192 ff., 213 ff.

[12] See Welwei (n. 4) 201–208; H. Bengtson, *Griechische Geschichte von den Anfängen bis in die römische Kaiserzeit* (München [5]1996 [1977]) 240–244; R. Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* (Oxford 1972) 345–349.

[13] Meiggs (n. 12) 349.

[14] Cf. B. Zimmermann, "Utopisches und Utopie in den Komödien des Aristophanes", *WJB* N. F. 9 (1983) 69.

At first glance, we do not recognize here any references to the political reality of 415/414. Whereas some have been content to leave it at that and began to think about escapism, instead, most Aristophanean scholars were tempted to detect a 'hidden' meaning in *Birds*, i. e. they took to allegorizing this comedy.[15] Regarding the last decades we may categorize the interpretations of *Birds* as follows:[16] *Birds* is usually understood as criticism, most commonly as criticizing the adventurous expedition to Sicily or even Athenian imperialism altogether.[17] Since Murray's early book on Aristophanes, the notion of escapist entertainment has never left the discussion: viewed this way, *Birds* becomes a radical negation of the Athenian present.[18] Others tried to read the play as a parable aiming at the general decline of religion among Athenians of the day.[19] All those interpretations share a tendency to believe in a *critical* function of *Birds* and of Old Comedy in general.[20]

There are several typical arguments at the core of critical interpretations of *Birds* which I have tried to summarize in four distinct propositions.

1. Whoever opposes the Olympian gods or, as Peisetaerus does, even topples them from power, is to be regarded as a transgressor of the polis' official religion and, therefore, the very opposite of a positive hero with whom the audience can identify.

2. The sympathies of any fifth-century Athenian audience certainly would hardly be with anybody trying to set himself up as τύραννος (as

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[15] H.-J. Newiger, "Die 'Vögel' und ihre Stellung im Gesamtwerk des Aristophanes", in: idem (ed.), *Aristophanes und die Alte Komödie* (Darmstadt 1970) 276 f.

[16] Cf. the surveys given by M. Landfester, *Gnomon* 58 (1986) 673; P. v. Möllendorff, *Aristophanes* (Hildesheim 2002) 108–115.

[17] Esp. in the German tradition: cf., e. g., H.-J. Newiger, "Gedanken zu Aristophanes' Vögeln" [1983], in: idem, *Drama und Theater* (Stuttgart 1996) 337 ff.; M. Hose, *Drama und Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart 1995) 58–66; P. v. Möllendorff, *Grundlagen einer Ästhetik der Alten Komödie* (Tübingen 1995) 184–192; idem (n. 16) 113 ff.; B. Zimmermann, *Die griechische Komödie* (Düsseldorf – Zürich 1998) 72, 152; E.-R. Schwinge, "Aristophanes und Euripides", in: Ercolani (n. 1) 17.

[18] For the escapist tradition see Newiger (n. 15) 268; cf. E.-R. Schwinge, "Aristophanes und die Utopie", *WJB* N. F. 3 (1977) 53.

[19] E. g., M. Landfester, *Handlungsverlauf und Komik in den frühen Komödien des Aristophanes* (Berlin – New York 1977) 290; W. D. Furley, *Andokides and the Herms*, BICS Suppl. 65 (London 1996) 138 ff.

[20] E. g., E.-R. Schwinge, "Kritik und Komik. Gedanken zu Aristophanes' Wespen", in: J. Cobet e. a. (eds.), *Dialogos. FS Harald Patzer* (Wiesbaden 1975) 35; cf. idem (n. 18) 55.

Peisetaerus is termed in v. 1708), let alone with anybody who finally succeeds in doing so, as Peisetaerus does.

3. Demonstrably, Aristophanes in some of his plays (*Ach*., *Pax*, *Lys*.) takes a line against war, which means that *Birds* also is to be understood as an anti-war manifesto of some kind.[21]

4. The project to conquer Sicily (Thuc. 6. 90. 2 f.) proved to be risky and led to utter failure. Aristophanes may have sensed this in advance and may have intended to depict Peisetaerus as a travesty-like conqueror of the world in order to counsel his fellow citizens against engaging in any hubristic imperialism.

These arguments, insofar as they would force us to read *Birds* as critical, do not seem to be valid. *ad* 1. and 2. Both arguments are concerned with assessing what kind of response the fictitious character Peisetaerus and his actions might have provoked from an Athenian audience. Both of them touch upon the problem of whether Peisetaerus is a typical comic hero, and if so, whether or not this specific hero was designed by the author to be met with approval and identification by the audience. In other words, if Aristophanes meant his fictitious hero to provoke the audience's disapproval, this will be a strong point in favor of a critical reading of *Birds*. If approval or even identification turns out to be the intended response, a critical reading seems improbable.

What kind of comic hero is Peisetaerus, then? Obviously, he has much in common with the comic heroes we find elsewhere in Aristophanes' comedies.[22] As Dicaeopolis (*Ach.*), Trygaeus (*Pax*), perhaps Strepsiades (*Clouds*), Bdelycleon (*Wasps*), Euripides' relative (*Thesm.*) and, if for once we refrain from looking at the hero's sex, also Lysistrata (*Lys.*), Peisetaerus is an Athenian citizen of advanced age. He is neither rich nor poor. More importantly, he is energetic, intelligent, and able to convince people by speech. Furthermore, he takes action against all persons and groups disliked by most Athenians, e. g. parasites, sycophants, intellectuals, profiteers, corrupt officials etc. *Birds* teems with allusions founded on this kind of general aversion. In the beginning of the plot, furthermore, Peisetaerus is merely looking for a place of peaceful idleness (τόπος ἀπράγμων, v. 44), but after a while he

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[21] Cf., e. g., J. Griffin, "The Social Function of Attic Tragedy", *CQ* 48 (1998) 44.

[22] For comic heroes, see J. Henderson, "Comic Hero versus Political Élite", in: A. H. Sommerstein e. a. (eds.), *Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis* (Bari 1993) 309; idem, "Mass versus Élite and the Comic Heroism of Peisetairos", in: G. W. Dobrov (ed.), *The City as Comedy. Society and Representation in Athenian Drama* (Chapel Hill – London 1997) 137 ff.

virtually bursts with activity – a change Athenians might have found agreeable, too, because it touches upon the concept of πολυπραγμοσύνη as a part of Athenian self-construction.[23]

These facts seem to back the assumption of an affirmative, identificatory response of the audience when confronted with Peisetaerus. But what about the arguments given above in favor of the opposite? Obviously, the gods' dethronement at the hands of Peisetaerus is *not* presented to the audience as an act of hubris. First, of the three gods actually staged in *Birds* Poseidon is the only figure of genuine religious and cultic caliber (the obese and dumb character of Hercules is merely a comic convention, and has nothing in common with Hercules as the subject of cult. The barbarous Triballus is an invention of the poet) who is made to yield to his outsmarted peers according to the principles of Olympic democracy. Second, within the realm of the fictitious action, there is no comment upon the explicit transgression of any religious norms by Peisetaerus whatsoever. Nobody voices his disapproval of the actions of Peisetaerus (with the exception, naturally, of those detestable characters who are insulted or beaten up by the comic hero – but in these cases the comic effect is based precisely upon the audience's *approval* of the comic hero's behavior). Third, Aristophanes plays upon the motif of succession of power from one generation of gods to another. In former times, birds were the rulers of the world, as Peisetaerus lengthily points out to them (vv. 467–520), but then they were superseded by the Olympian gods. In turn, this mythopoetic construction appears to grant the essential justice of the Olympians' dethronement by bird-gods. Instead of being presented as a hubristic transgressor, then, on the contrary Peisetaerus appears as an instrument of somehow cosmic (we cannot very well say divine) justice. There is no evidence for the claim that the plot of *Birds* was taken to interfere with the cultic system of the Polis. On the contrary, poking fun at the Olympians is one of the basic elements of Old Comedy,[24] as we can deduce from, e. g., *Frogs* where we watch comic Dionysus being beaten up

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[23] V. Ehrenberg, "Polypragmosyne: A study in Greek Politics", *JHS* 67 (1947) 46–67. Cf. Thuc. 1. 70. 9, 6. 87. 3; in *Av.* 471 πολυπράγμων obviously has a positive meaning; cf. *Vesp.* 684 f., Eur. *Suppl*. 324 f.; cf. J. Henderson (ed.), *Aristophanes*, *Lysistrata* (Oxford 1987) 217 f. See K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Berkeley – Los Angeles 1974) 187–190 for ἀ-, πολυ-, and φιλοπραγμοσύνη. Even if the overtones of v. 471 were ironic (as ἀμαθής might show), this would not shatter the essentially positive connotation of πολυπραγμοσύνη here.

[24] See N. Dunbar (ed.), *Aristophanes, Birds* (Oxford 1995) 12 f.; cf. D. M. MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens* (Oxford 1995) 18.

right on stage (vv. 605–673), in front of his statue which represented the god as supervising his own festival. Thus, within the institutional frame of Old Comedy making jokes about the gods certainly was not regarded as an act of impiety.[25] For our audience the pursuit of human goals was obviously a matter of purely human business, even if this business dealt with nothing less than a utopian change of political or economical reality (it may appear tempting to regard this attitude as a typically Athenian outlook on life and the human condition[26]). On the other hand, there are certainly limits to the birds' triumph over the Olympians, e. g. the considerable ambiguity as to what happens to the gods, especially to Zeus, after Peisetaerus has become king of *Nephelokokkygia*. This ambiguity avoids any serious interference with religious concepts beyond the fictitious overthrowing of a mock-Olympians' rule within the realm of fancy. We may assume, then, that Peisetaerus was not regarded by the audience as an impious transgressor.

The same applies to the second argument: As king or 'tyrant' of the birds Peisetaerus has entered upon a position which is equal to Zeus: there seems to be the implicit assumption that democracy is not a system favored by gods, as e. g. Homer or Hesiod amply demonstrated (the decision of the Olympians' outwitted delegates which was settled in a mock-democratic way affirms this assumption). As Peisetaerus' career leads him to a god-like status, to become a τύραννος is presumably the logical end of the story. But even when we do not allow for a realm of fiction where usually valid norms are not valid any more, it is far from certain that the catchword τύραννος would have provoked nothing but negative responses from an Athenian audience. Certainly Athenians would have never put up with becoming a tyrant's subjects themselves, and they appear to have extended this attitude to allied cities as well.[27] But, all in all, the concept of making oneself tyrant never ceased to exert a good deal of fascination for Athenians. Obviously, the aversions against it were not necessarily

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[25] Cf. Dover (n. 23) 19. About gods as comic targets see I. Stark, *Die hämische Muse* (München 2004) 105 f., 128 f.

[26] Thucydides shows us (5. 103. 2, 105. 1), how in dealing with Melos the Athenians counsel them *not* to set their sights on the gods, as long they themselves as humans (ἀνθρωπείως) can do something for their future. Cf. Dover (n. 23) 130–133; Henderson, "Mass versus Élite …" (n. 22) 143.

[27] Cf. *IG* I³ 14 (= Meiggs/Lewis Nr. 40, ca. 452 BC), l. 32–34: the text is lacunose, but it *might* speak of politics opposed to Athens' interests as of 'tyrannical' (Welwei [n. 4] 102).

founded on general moral standards. Therefore, when confronted with the problem how to rule *other* people, non-Athenians or even non-Greeks, tyranny certainly presented itself as an acceptable option (we may gather this from Pericles' and Cleon's fond description of Athenian rule in terms of tyranny, as given by Thucydides).[28] Τύραννος had been used so often in polemical disputes that it was in danger of losing its meaning, which is demonstrated by a passage in *Wasps* (vv. 488 ff., staged in 422). The audience for which *Wasps* had been staged was obviously tired of being portrayed as striving for tyranny by political opponents whenever there was the slightest opportunity. Remembering that the average social level of the audience would have differed considerably from that of the assembly we conclude that being called τύραννος may have lost much of its pejorative meaning for the audience of comedy, because this audience may have been used to regard it as a mere catchword used against their own interests, probably by the assembly's demagogues.[29] If true, this implies an affirmative effect on the audience as a social group when watching *Wasps* and dealing with the problem of being labeled τύραννος. Obviously, such an audience is not likely to have turned down a comic hero for reaching a τύραννος-like position in the fictional realm of utopia. Trygaios, the comic hero in *Peace*, presents us with a perfect parallel: He is termed αὐτοκράτωρ (v. 359), and he acts certainly as a focus of the audience's sympathy.

Much has been made of Peisetaerus' broiling fellow birds in order to lure into assent gluttonous Hercules with the pleasant smell of roasting meat. In passing, he justifies this instance of the birds' polis' authority by hinting at subversive activities of these executed birds. Many scholars have judged this as an act of the tyrant's unmasking, which would have finally induced the audience to withdraw their sympathies. So this marginal scene

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[28] See Thuc. 2. 63. 2, 3. 37. 1 f, 6. 85. 1; cf. Aristoph. *Equ.* 1111–1114; *Thesm.* 1143 f. Cf. generally W. Schuller, *Die Stadt als Tyrann. Athens Herrschaft über seine Bundesgenossen* (Konstanz 1978) 10 ff.; Ch. Tuplin, "Imperial Tyranny: Some Reflections", in: P. A. Cartledge, F. D. Harvey (eds.), *Crux. Essays presented to G. E. M. de Ste. Croix = Hist. of Pol. Thought* 6 (1985) 348–375. For the connotations of τύραννος see R. Seaford, "The Social Function of Attic Tragedy: A Response to Jasper Griffin", *CQ* 50 (2000) 34; J. Henderson (n. 23) xxiv; for Pericles as tyrant cf. I. Ruffell, "The World Turned Upside Down: Utopia and Utopianism in the Fragments of Old Comedy", in: D. Harvey, J. Wilkins (eds.), *The Rivals of Aristophanes* (London 2000) 497 n. 28.

[29] Cf. K.-J. Hölkeskamp, "Parteiungen und politische Willensbildung im demokratischen Athen", *HZ* 267 (1998) 14 f., 23 for political groups at Athens.

has become one of the cornerstones of any critical interpretation of *Birds*.[30] This approach strikes me as anachronistic; moreover, it totally ignores the funny aspects of the scene. First, at Athens it was quite usual to sentence to death convicted subversives, which is demonstrated, e. g. by the trials of Andocides and Socrates. A patriotic Athenian is hardly to be imagined as taking any offence at an established legal practice like this, provided that the procedures had been lawfully observed. Second, Aristophanes is obviously drawing parallels between the birds' polis and Athens (which throughout the play implicitly presents the background against which the birds' polis is described): as in Athens, citizens who have been convicted of high treason are subject to the death penalty; but, quite unlike Athens – you can broil and eat them afterwards with tasty gravy! One more reason to prefer the utopian *Nephelokokkygia* to any other given polis! Thus, this scene is no evidence in favor of the critical interpretation.

To sum up: Peisetaerus is a fictitious person who was probably designed by the poet as a focus for the audience's identification.[31] Judged by the typical traits from which Aristophanes constructs his comic heroes, the audience which we may reconstruct through its self-identifying response seems to have been something like a middle-class which explains, e. g., the latent conservatism of Aristophanes regarding radical democrats like Cleon or Hyperbolos.[32] If I am right, Aristophanes' comic heroes are to be regarded as documenting the self-concept of a class-like group of Athenians[33] – and it is certainly not by chance that this is precisely the group

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[30] See, e. g., A. Bowie, *Aristophanes. Myth, Ritual and Comedy* (Cambridge 1993) 168 f.; v. Möllendorff (n. 17) 186; idem (n. 16) 109 f.; P. Ceccarelli, "Life Among Savages and Escape From the City", in: Harvey, Wilkins (n. 28) 467 n. 30; N. W. Slater, "Performing the City in *Birds*", in: Dobrov (n. 22) 87; more cautious D. Konstan, *Greek Comedy and Ideology* (Oxford 1995) 42.

[31] See Dover (n. 23) 19; Henderson, "Comic Hero versus Political Élite" (n. 22) 309 f.; MacDowell (n. 24) 224; cf. Landfester (n. 19) 287. Hardly right A. Bierl, "'Viel Spott, viel Ehr!'", in: Ercolani (n. 1) 175. Even notorious Dicaeopolis (*Ach.*) has recently been shown to be a positive focus of identification, by Ch. Brockmann, "Der Friedensmann als selbstsüchtiger Hedonist?", in: Ercolani (n. 1) 271 f.

[32] M. Landfester, *Gnomon* 58 (1986) 675 f. (see, however, idem [n. 6] 30); J. Henderson, "The *Demos* and Comic Competition", in: F. Zeitlin, J. J. Winkler (eds.), *Nothing to Do With Dionysus? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context* (Princeton, NJ 1990) 311.

[33] Cf. K. Reinhardt, "Aristophanes und Athen" [1938], in: idem, *Tradition und Geist* (Göttingen 1960) 266; W. Rösler, *Polis und Tragödie. Funktionsgeschichtliche Betrachtungen zu einer antiken Literaturgattung*, Konstanzer Univ.-Reden 138 (Konstanz 1980) 10. *Contra* Zimmermann (n. 14) 67 f.

which, selected by its ability to pay the admission fee, would have represented the majority of the actual audience. Therefore, we have to understand Aristophanes' comic heroes as a means of communication between poet and audience: the poet provides a figure as a focus of identification for a certain group; this group, in turn, enjoys this practice of identification and supports the poet's contribution to the contest. To *enjoy* the act of identification the audience has to watch something happening to the comic hero which affirms this very audience, which brings us to the second pair of arguments.

ad 3. If we assent to the common opinion that accepts the expedition to Sicily as the most probable political background of *Birds*, will we not be forced, then, to assume that Aristophanes opposes it energetically, just because he generally seems to be opposed to war, as was often concluded from peace-related utopias as *Ach.*, *Lys.* or *Pax*? Reading more carefully, we discover, however, that there is no such thing as a *general* opposition to war in 5th century Athens. Whoever voices an opposition against a certain political urge to war, opposes a *specific* war for a specific reason. At Athens, different social groups profit from different forms of war. To be sure, many of the Zeugites and of the πλούσιοι in general must have suffered substantially from the Periclean strategy during the Archidamian war, because most of this class would have possessed landed property in Attica or have been involved in trade – differently from the Thetes and all the πένητες who profited from the polis' military, esp. naval build-up. Hence, the aggressive strategy of Pericles and his followers was backed up basically by the polis' lower classes. (Of course, talking of 'class' in this case is not to adopt a socially deterministic outlook on Athenian society: but, granted that this society was open to social mobility as it certainly was,[34] using class concepts like 'Zeugites' and 'Thetes' may provide us with an *approximation* to group-centered political tendencies.) Remembering, once again, the social structure of our audiences, we should not be surprised to find wide-spread unease among them, to put it mildly, at the state of foreign affairs during the Archidamian and Ionian wars. Therefore, the enmity towards the supporters of any war fought *on the very ground of Attica*, which pervades Aristophanes' plays during the 420s and after 411, is to be explained in terms of the Zeugites who suffered from this war economically.[35] It is certainly not

[34] See K.-W. Welwei, *Die griechische Polis. Verfassung und Gesellschaft in archaischer und klassischer Zeit* (Stuttgart [2]1998) 215–218; Hölkeskamp (n. 29) *passim*.

[35] Similarly Henderson (n. 32), esp. n. 142.

to be explained as a pacifist poet's statement against war in general. Once again, Aristophanes will have voiced his audience's main concerns, nothing more. That the poet expects an audience dominated by Zeugites seems obvious from the fact that Thetes are, similar to women, ignored when it comes to picturing the whole of Athenian society (as, e. g., profiting from peace in *Peace*).[36] To describe this practice as 'conservatism of the poet' [37] means to mistake the strategy of a competitive poet aiming at τιμή for his personal conviction: quite the contrary, it is the 'conservatism' of his audience that makes the poet appear to be 'conservative'; and even then, 'conservatism' in this case is a group's reasonable dislike for politics which tend to or may even have been designed to impoverish them. The so-called conservatism of the comic poets, then, seems to be an upshot of their audience's social structure which made them oppose the more radical leaders of the *demos*.[38]

But to oppose any war strategy which surrenders the hinterland of Athens to the Peloponnesians is not the same as opposing any war in general. Judging by economic wins and losses we would be surprised to find Zeugites refusing warfare conducted, e. g., in Ionia or Sicily. Once again, Aristophanes' *Peace* corroborates our speculations by stating precisely that above all a war *in Attica* (πόλεμος ἐπιδήμιος, v. 1098) is to be opposed. When looking at *Birds* in a fresh light and especially at the few passages concerning actual warfare in overseas areas of Athens' empire, we come across an obvious tendency to back these operations.[39] Three instances will suffice to demonstrate this: Nicias, leader of the forces sent to Sicily, becomes a target of jest because his operational strategy appears to the poet (and, probably, his audience) as much too *cautious*.[40] The terrible fate of Melos' inhabitants who were virtually annihilated by Athenian forces in 415 is merrily laughed at by our audience (v. 186) (only later did Melos become a blot on Athenian imperial his-

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[36] *Peace* praises the bliss of peace exclusively in terms of *rural* happiness (520 ff.), blames demagogues *and the poor* for making war in the first place (632 ff.), and ignores the Thetes (see S. D. Olson [ed.], *Aristophanes, Peace* [Oxford 1998] p. 188 *ad* v. 543 f. τὰς τέχνας).

[37] For the 'conservatism' of comic poets, e. g., Landfester (n. 6) 31 f.; Henderson (n. 2) 270 f.

[38] As Pericles (attacked by, e. g., Cratinus in *Dionysalexander*), Cleon, and Hyperbolos.

[39] As was already stated by A. H. Sommerstein (ed.), *Aristophanes, Birds* (Warminster 1987) 5, cf. Henderson, "Mass versus Élite" (n. 22) 142 f.

[40] V. 640 μελλονικιᾶν, cf. Thuc. 6. 8. 4, 6. 25. 1; cf. Bengtson (n. 12) 242.

tory).[41] In 1360–1371 Peisetaerus counsels an aggressive son, eager to fight his own father, to volunteer for military service in Thracia, instead, in order to work off his martial impulses (there, Athenian rule was troubled by unreliable allies). From this evidence, with regard to Aristophanes' audience, clearly emerges an attitude in favor of overseas war, as long as it serves Athenian interests. Of course, *after* the Sicilian enterprise had failed, comic audiences would have severely regretted ever having become involved in it.[42] But this is a natural reaction to painful failure and its severe consequences for Athenian life, nothing more. In general terms, the longing for hegemonic power and the unscrupulous determination to apply any means to achieve this aim may have featured significantly in an ordinary Athenian's self-image.[43]

ad 4. That in *Birds* the expedition to Sicily lurks somewhere in the background appears plausible.[44] Most readers therefore feel compelled to compare the risky enterprise of Peisetaerus to the risky enterprise of trying to conquer Sicily. So far, my own reading does not differ in this regard. As shown above, however, at the time of the City Dionysia in 414 there was no reason to doubt the eventual success of the enterprise. The assembly had decided in favor of the expedition after ample discussion. Surely at this time they did not feel that Alcibiades had talked them into it. There seemed to be a sound chance to be successful, for otherwise the assembly never would have voted in its favor. The atmosphere, then, would have been more confident than nervous.[45] Thucydides sketches the *common* euphoria at Athens immediately before the forces departed.[46] There is no reason to assume that Aristophanes and his audience should have been in an entirely different, in fact contrary, mood by March 414.[47]

Obviously, to assess the plot of *Birds* like a devotee of Thucydides would, looking back at the events as leading to Sicilian doom, would be sheer anachronism (though an artistically tempting one). The risky enter-

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[41] Cf. Sommerstein (n. 39) 5 n. 19 (Isocrates). So, with regard to Melos, maybe Thucydides represents or foreshadows 4th-century collective memory.

[42] E. g., *Lys.* 391–397, maybe 589 f.

[43] Hölkeskamp (n. 29) 18.

[44] Cf. J. Henderson and A. Sommerstein in Konstan (n. 30) 31 with 175 n. 4. *Contra* K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley – Los Angeles 1972) 145 f.; Dunbar (n. 24) 3; MacDowell (n. 24) 223.

[45] Similarly Meiggs (n. 12) 448 f., hinting at *Av.* 1021–1055.

[46] Thuc. 6. 24. 3 f.; cf. 6. 31. 6.

[47] As has been pointed out already by K. J. Dover (ed.), *Aristophanes, Clouds* (Oxford 1968) xxi; idem (n. 44) 146.

prise Peisetaerus embarks upon is surprisingly successful. Peisetaerus' resourceful mind and unbroken self-assertion, these two most Athenian of his qualities, prove potent enough to overcome all obstacles. Our play ends with Peisetaerus being celebrated as the god-like ruler of the world. The celebrations within the play would have been viewed as paralleled by the festivals' celebrations framing the play,[48] and perhaps, by celebrations of victory in war. If the audience really was in the habit of allegorizing the plays they watched (which can be neither proven nor excluded),[49] it would have arrived at a meaning like this: even in the most difficult of situations a typical Athenian, the comic hero, may be successful by applying his most Athenian-like personal traits: quick understanding, rhetorical ability and will to resolute action. If Athenian audiences were eager to identify with comic heroes and if they identified with Peisetaerus as well, in this situation of tension and of hope the effect obviously would have been an affirmative one.

Thus, the reasons why I take *Birds* to be an affirmative comedy have already emerged.[50] Above all, Peisetaerus, the focus of the audience's identification, starts out from an insecure and marginal status but ends in complete, god-like happiness. His are the audience's sympathies, which means that his happiness is shared by them,[51] of course in a mimetically mediated and transformed way. This emotional process presumably results in the audience's general elation. They are elated by their comic hero's utopian successes, because identification makes them perceive the plot of *Birds* as a fantasy of power. If Peisetaerus ends up as τύραννος of mankind and the birds' polis, Athenian citizens will be led to understand this as an amusing and openly flattering fantasy concerning *their* own ambition. Within the limits of fiction, comic heroes act on behalf of their audience in comically standardized problem situations. These are amusingly absurd but recognizable distortions of real-life problem situations. If Peisetaerus really is an incarnation of Athenian self-reliance, clearly his fairy tale-like career will

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[48] A. Bierl, *Der Chor in der Alten Komödie. Ritual und Performativität* (München – Leipzig 2001) 370 f.

[49] Usually, Aristophanes marks out his allegories carefully (e. g., *Vesp.* 918–933, *Pax* 46 f.). From the absence of such markers here, we may conclude that *Birds* was not to be read as an allegory; cf. Henderson, "Mass versus Élite" (n. 22) 136.

[50] Similar interpretations have been thought of only rarely (and rejected) by G. Murray, *Aristophanes* (Oxford 1933) 155 f.; Newiger (n. 17) 337 ff.; Henderson, "Comic Hero versus Political Élite" (n. 22) 315 f.

[51] MacDowell (n. 24) 227 f.

have an affirmative effect upon the audience of *Birds*. In assuming this, I do not propose just another allegory, but rather an involuntary emotional response on behalf of the spectator who most likely identifies himself with the comic hero and, thus, the narrative frame of the play with his own situation. He will, e. g., recognize his own polis in victorious and rightly blissful *Nephelokokkygia*.[52]

If everybody in Athens was waiting eagerly for news from Sicily, a plot of huge, utopian success would have affirmed the self-reliance of the audience, its typical Athenian "awareness of ability".[53] Therefore, we arrive at the conclusion that *Birds* must have been designed and watched as a play of affirmation, as a play of Athenian self-assurance.[54] Of course, Aristophanes did not mean to abolish skeptical attitudes for ever after; he must have been interested primarily in elating his audience's spirit. As the second prize won by *Birds* may show, his strategy proved successful.

2. GENERALIZATIONS

When trying to reconstruct the appeal of *Birds,* we used the opposite concepts of affirmation and critique and, for the sake of the argument, we pretended that the decision between the two was principally open, that there was a genuine probability for *Birds* and Old Comedy as a whole to be either, critical or affirmative. It seems unlikely, however, that public discourse, funded by the polis, staged within the context of an institution devised to enact a huge self-representation of this community, would voice serious

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[52] Peisetaerus' strategy seems similar to the Periclean concept of θαλασσοκρατία: cf. *Av.* 183–186 and Thuc. 2. 62. 2 f.; Ps.-Xen. *Ath. pol.* 2. 6, 11 f.; Ceccarelli (n. 30) 467 n. 27. *Av.* 124 ff., 1281 ff. seem to identify *Nephelokokkygia* and Athens; *contra* Slater (n. 30) 81 on *Av.* 826–836 (which I understand as a joke, esp. for Athenians); Schwinge (n. 18) 53; cf. Henderson, "Mass versus Élite" (n. 22) 135 f.

[53] Ch. Meier, "Ein antikes Äquivalent des Fortschrittsgedankens", *HZ* 226 (1978) 295–301, 311, reconstructed an awareness of ability ("Könnens-Bewußtsein") as a typical Athenian way of self-construction. That there really was something like an 'awareness of national ability' at Athens is, e. g., demonstrated by a fragment from Eupolis' *Poleis* (fr. 234 *PCG*): τί δέ ἐστ᾽ Ἀθηναίοισι πρᾶγμ᾽ ἀπώμοτον; In passing, Meier (*ibid*. 299 n. 113) actually reads *Birds* as evidence for an unrealistic self-confidence of Athens.

[54] Of course, there is more in *Birds*: e. g., its plot may be also read as a discourse about the conflicting principles of ἡσυχία *vs.* πολυπραγμοσύνη: cf. Dunbar (n. 24) 4 f.; but cf. M. Heath, "Aristophanes and the Discourse of Politics", in: Dobrov (n. 22) 234–236 and, e. g., Thuc. 6. 18. 3 ff. However, as a result of this reading we will find, again, that πολυπραγμοσύνη is shown to be successful.

criticism of this very community. By reading *Birds* as a play of affirmation in difficult times, the play fits in with the overall purpose of the City Dionysia which consisted largely of affirmative structures (most conspicuously, e. g., the parade of orphaned ephebes, children of citizens who had fallen in battle, and the public display of tribute from subject poleis *right before the dramatic agon began*). Now, if *Birds* has an affirmative impact, we may ask whether this holds also true for Old Comedy as a genre.

Let me consider, albeit briefly, several generic traits of Old Comedy. First, we may look afresh at comedies based upon a plot-structure similar to *Birds*: *Acharnians*, *Peace*, *Lysistrata*, *Ecclesiazousai* and *Wealth* come to mind. In all these instances a typical Athenian character changes comically distorted reality into comically simplified utopia. I conclude that, as *Birds*, all these plays do affirm the above indicated Athenian "awareness of ability". In all instances, the comic hero is designed to work as a vehicle of affirmation by presenting the audience with a focus of identification. These identificatory responses imply that the audience participates in the hero's success, however figuratively.

Second, I wonder whether the meta-dramatical implications of comedy may be read as acts of affirmation. Since a considerable part of extant comedies is concerned with theatre itself (*Frogs*, *Thesmophoriazousai*), and since a considerable part of jokes played in comedies in general is meta-dramatical,[55] these prominent features would have to be analyzed as references to the social context of comedy. Without going into details, the very criteria for judging poets and performances (e. g. Kinesias in *Birds*, Euripides in *Acharnians* and *Thesmophoriazousai,* Euripides and Aeschylus in *Frogs*) are centered less around aesthetical than political judgment, which means that in all these instances, the affirmative capacity of drama in general and even of the festival itself is up to the audience's judgment.

Now, to come to terms with the generic whole of Old Comedy I will confine myself to looking at three distinctive features of the genre before, finally, concentrating upon the phenomenon of group laughter in itself and its social effects.

First, since antiquity, the astonishing rigor adopted by the poets in poking fun at individuals, mercilessly singling them out as targets of jest (so-called ὀνομαστὶ κωμῳδεῖν), has been judged to be the most conspicuous feature of Old Comedy. Usually scholars understand the habit as indicating the intention of the comic poets to *improve* the moral standards of the polis.

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[55] Cf. now Schwinge (n. 17) 6 f.

On the contrary, I wish to point out that Old Comedy's scoffing at real people was a method to sketch outsiders precisely in order to stabilize the collective remainder of the audience. As I see it, the practice of ὀνομαστὶ κωμῳδεῖν is not primarily focused on the targets of jest but on the mass of spectators who identify with the jesting subject and distinguish themselves from the object being laughed at. Having shifted the emphasis this way, we may understand more easily why there is so little alternation within the group of targets as well as why the reproaches appear to be fairly standardized (some of which simply cannot be true, as, e. g., accusing Kleonymos of ῥιψασπία).[56] These targets preferred by comic poets and, naturally, by the audiences, appear to be related to the audience in an asymmetrical form of *joking relationship*, which produces laughter exclusively at their expense: [57] within the limits of ὀνομαστὶ κωμῳδεῖν the audience *never* laughs at itself, but always and exclusively at some clearly distant personification of otherness.

In other words: comedy makes fun of prominent people not in order to affect *them*, but rather to mark them out as transgressing norms and, thereby, to validate these very norms in front of the largest group of citizens imaginable.[58] This particular form of jest is concerned not with individuals, but rather with the collective and its norms. Second, often these jokes are centered around civic identity; [59] for the jest touches upon either the illegitimate claim of civic rights or upon the conspicuous failure of behaving as Athenians should, in military, sexual, or political respects. Obviously, the common denominator of this joking practice is the transgression of a normative role which, though, is never explicitly defined (norms derive their binding

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[56] I. Stark, "Athenische Politiker und Strategen als Feiglinge, Betrüger und Klaffärsche", in: Ercolani (n. 1) 152–155, provides a list of incriminations.

[57] *Pace* v. Möllendorff (n. 16) 190 there is no 'symmetrical laughter' in Old Comedy. As I try to point out below, group laughter is bound to be asymmetrical.

[58] Cf. Henderson (n. 32) 295 f.; Stark (n. 25) 218–322; generally, see J. C. Turner, S. A. Haslam, "Social Identity, Organizations, and Leadership", in: M. E. Turner (ed.), *Groups at Work: Theory and Research* (Mahwah, NJ – London 2001) 27 ff. Ps.-Xen., *Ath. pol.* 2. 18 has already observed this: according to him, comedy makes fun of everybody who transgresses the confines of his social milieu, that is either of the rich and powerful (ὁ πλούσιος ὁ γενναῖος ὁ δυνάμενος), or the poor, if they should dare to long for distinction; cf. Henderson (n. 32) 275; J. Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens. Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton, NJ 1998) 123.

[59] To confine ourselves to *Birds*: probably in v. 11 about Execestides (cf. 764); in v. 31 about Sakes (= 'Asian'); in v. 762 about Spintharus who is denigrated as 'the Phrygian'; in v. 763 the same about Philemon.

force precisely from appearing perfectly natural and self-evident). Therefore, ὀνομαστὶ κωμῳδεῖν, by depicting an out-group of transgressors, has the effect to further the audience's integration.[60] It affirms the nomological system of the polis by making the citizens laugh at comically distorted transgressors of this very system. In our terms, then, it is to be classified as affirmative.

Second, there is a more developed form of it which puts one person at the center of the whole play. *Knights* (staged in 424, at the Lenaia) presents the most important extant example, but there were lots of plays, now lost, centered around only one prominent person. Quite obviously, the jest would have functioned as outlined above in instances like this, too, but on top of that, there may have been a cathartic effect as well (anthropologists use the expression of *ventilsitte*).[61] Such customs develop in order to channel social envy at the rich and powerful and thereby to restore the community's social façade without genuine social change. These customs probably ensure psychological relief for most members of the collective,[62] but without actual consequences in real life. In order to make this *ventilsitte* work it is not even necessary that the comic reproaches be true. Much to the contrary, the proper asymmetry of power is restored whenever the collective publicly laughs at the individual, regardless of how powerful this person may be in real life. The more unjust the mockery is, the more impressive its effect.[63] To give an example: scholars used to be disturbed by the fact that, only a couple of weeks after *Knights* was staged, Cleon was appointed στρατηγός by the assembly.[64] Most of them were tempted to understand this fact simply as a failure of Aristophanes' intentions. Instead, if we look at Old Comedy as an instance of *ventilsitte*, we might understand why Cleon had regained enough popularity to be elected στρατηγός. Cleon might have appeared acceptable

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[60] Now, G. Kloss, "Sprachverwendung und Gruppenzugehörigkeit als Thema der Alten Komödie", in: Ercolani (n. 1) 86 f., looks at the language of comedy's out-groups from a similar angle.

[61] I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt, *Die Biologie des menschlichen Verhaltens. Grundriß der Humanethologie* (München 1997) 543; cf. Zimmermann (n. 14) 65 f.; Newiger (n. 17) 334; E. Segal, *Roman Laughter. The Comedy of Plautus* (New York – Oxford ²1987 [1967]) 13.

[62] See N. Fisher, "Symposiasts, Fish-Eaters and Flatterers: Social Mobility and Moral Concerns in Old Comedy", in: Harvey, Wilkins (n. 28) 355 ff.; Ruffell (n. 28) 474–486. *Birds* was recently read as *ventilsitte* with a more specific meaning by Furley (n. 19) 139.

[63] *Pace* Stark (n. 56) 163 ff.

[64] For Cleon cf. Olson (n. 36) 77; Mann (n. 1) 105 ff.; Welwei (n. 4) 180 f.

as στρατηγός precisely because he had been humiliated symbolically in the face of the polis at the Lenaia (this is, of course, impossible to prove). The ordinary Athenian probably looked at Cleon, not as genuinely humiliated, but as symbolically humiliated, that is, as controllable in spite of all his power. All 'demagogue comedies' [65] may be explained according to this pattern. As far as being a *ventilsitte*, Old Comedy re-levels society fictitiously, which leads to an emotional re-assessment of political reality outside of comedy. We may conclude that the typical asymmetry of Old Comedy's joking relationships is to be viewed as an institutionally limited, symbolically coded powerlessness of the powerful, meant to compensate for the real powerlessness of most spectators. (We may wonder whether some mass media in our modern societies could be termed a *ventilsitte* as well.) Insofar as this feature of comedy's ridiculing real persons is meant to stabilize the polis and prevent it from discord, we may categorize it as affirmative as well.

Third, Old Comedy has rightly been described as an "art of the impossible" [66] because of its fantastic features. Poets and audiences obviously were fond of fictitious, even utopian plots embellished with fantastic, sometimes anarchic humor. Besides the overthrow of the gods in *Birds*, we may recall the sex-strike staged in *Lysistrata* or dung beetle-Pegasus in *Peace.* Obviously, the fantastic features in some instances are meant to domesticate topics too controversial to present to the entire polis, if approached in realistic terms (most blatantly, the problem of when and how and at whose expenses to settle peace). E. g., the absurdity – viewed from an Athenian's point of view – of women's revolution in *Lysistrata* might take the edge off a subject which, put in a real life-setting, would have immediately sparked bitter quarrels among the audience.

Even this element of fantasy, which is so prominent in Old Comedy, might be related to an affirmative impact of the plays. This will be instantly clear from the simple fact that in order to judge an absurdity on stage as such, the audience has to compare it with their real life. So, whenever the comic poet is constructing a counter-world, every impact

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[65] Their targets being usually the leaders of the demos, e. g., Cleon, Hyperbolus, Cleophon, Rhinon. Cf. A. H. Sommerstein, "Platon, Eupolis and the 'Demagogue-Comedy'", in: Harvey, Wilkins (n. 28) 444; for a different approach, see now Stark (n. 25) 291–305.

[66] J. Redfield, "Drama and Community: Aristophanes and Some of His Rivals", in: Zeitlin, Winkler (n. 32) 328: "If tragedy is an art of the probable, Old Comedy is an art of the impossible".

derivable from watching it on stage must be based on the implicit conclusions drawn from the real world of the audience. Since we often observe criticism of the fantastic realm put on stage, we may conclude that implicitly this criticism may have resulted in an affirmation of the audience's real world. In the following, I will call this phenomenon 'indirect affirmation'. To begin with two simple examples: In a lost play of Pherecrates, the Ἄγριοι ('Savages'), two misanthropes were shown emigrating out of Athens in search of perfect life (so far, quite similar to *Birds*). After a while, they happened to find a counter-place, some allegedly ideal society of ἄγριοι which in the end turned out to be much worse than Athens.[67] Similarly, in the Μονότροπος ('Loner') that placed third behind *Birds* in 414, Phrynichos poked fun at an extreme, comically exaggerated loner, of course as a counter-image to communitarian life at Athens.[68] Further, the 'women's comedies' of Aristophanes (*Lys*., *Ekkles*., *Thesm.*) present ample examples for indirect affirmation. In these instances, comic plots develop from the absurd difference between women's roles in the plays and the conduct to which the audience was accustomed. The laughter directed at those fantastic women staged, e. g., in *Lysistrata*, turns out to be an affirmation of real life-conditions at Athens which presents the contrast against which the plot is judged to be hilarious.[69] By constructing fantastic worlds of contrast, indirect affirmation provokes the audience to compare their own world favorably with the one on stage.

Certainly, the most significant generic feature of comedy is the audience's response: laughter. To sketch the peculiarity of the phenomenon: during a performance of Old Comedy a significant part of the polis laughs at the same jokes. From a sociologist's point of view, group laughter in itself, doubtlessly a constituent of (Old) comedy, performs a function of integration. For, either the laughing group is stabilized by the very act of laughing together, or it is stabilized by laughing at an outsider and thereby excluding him from the laughing group.[70] Psychologists differentiate these as "socio-positive" laughter (with the function of inclusion)

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[67] *PCG* vol. 7, fr. 5–20. For a paraphrase see Test. ii (Plat. *Prot.* 327 c – d); cf. Ceccarelli (n. 30) 455–458.

[68] *PCG* vol. 7, fr. 19–31, maybe 61 f. Cf. Ruffell (n. 28) 493–495, concerning "Athenocentric utopias" 486–490; Ceccarelli (n. 30) 462 "reaffirmation of the polis".

[69] For indirect appeals in Old Comedy cf. Landfester (n. 19) 263.

[70] Cf. E. Dupréel, "Le problème sociologique du rire", *Revue philos.* 106 (1928) 219, 228, 231–241.

and "socio-negative" laughter (with the function of exclusion).[71] Now, both inclusive and exclusive laughter have, as forms of communication, an important social function: they guarantee the maintenance of the laughing group's integration. Laughter in its 'socio-negative' aspect, i. e. the one most spectacular in Old Comedy, has been interpreted as a form of aggression performed in order to ensure (and to confirm) the validity of norms *within the laughing group*.[72] Hence, institutionalized group laughter of which Old Comedy is one of the most significant instances may be seen as an instrument of affirmation. As Erich Segal has put it: "Laughter is an affirmation of shared values".[73] Here, as response to institutionalized, publicly funded comedy, group laughter seems to aim at establishing a state of confident loyalty that is described by Thucydidean Pericles as "contemplating the power of the city and falling in love with her" (2. 43. 1). That seems to be a good description of what Athenian audiences would do while enjoying *Birds*.

So far, I have tried to show that some of the most conspicuous generic elements of Old Comedy probably had an affirmative impact upon the audience. For behind the jokes there often lies a normative conception of civic identity, which is affirmed by the group in the act of laughing. With regard to the above argumentation we now can generalize our reading of *Birds*: I propose to look at Old Comedy as a discourse designed to affirm civic identity by laughter at jokes touching upon challenges and violations of this identity.[74] More precisely, comedy appears to be a discourse designed to affirm the expected audience rather than the polis as a whole. Whenever the audience's intentions differed from those of the assembly or of the whole *demos*, we might expect comedy to affirm the audience, but to criticize the politics of the whole polis which is dominated by a different group (this might be the case with *Acharnians* and maybe also with *Knights*).

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[71] E. g., R. Lempp, *Das Lachen des Kindes. Das Lachen in der psychischen Entwicklung*, in: Th. Vogel (ed.), *Vom Lachen* (Tübingen 1992) 89 ff.

[72] Cf. Eibl-Eibesfeldt (n. 61) 447–450, 553–556; P. L. Berger, *Erlösendes Lachen. Das Komische in der menschlichen Erfahrung* (Berlin – New York 1998 [1997]) 81.

[73] Segal (n. 61) ix.

[74] Several scholars have *en passant* come up with similar concepts: Rösler (n. 33) 43 n. 31; W. Ameling, "Komödie und Politik zwischen Kratinos und Aristophanes: das Beispiel Perikles", *Quad. Catanesi di stud. class. e med.* 3 (1981) 384 f.; W. Rösler, "Über Aischrologie im archaischen und klassischen Griechenland", in: S. Döpp (ed.), *Karnevaleske Phänomene in antiken und nachantiken Kulturen und Literaturen* (Trier 1993) 79; Bierl (n. 48) 187.

3. OLD COMEDY AND ITS INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

Thus it seems plausible to assume affirmation as the main socio-political function of Old Comedy. Clearly, however, Old Comedy was part of institutionalized theatrical festivals, consisting of many more elements than comedy, among others, of tragedy. Some musings about tragedy's function might be appropriate, then.[75] Usually, comedy is taken to have been integrated into the complex festival of the City Dionysia [76] comparatively late, i. e. during the 480s.[77] On the basis of this, two simple conclusions present themselves: First, when comedy was introduced as part of the festival, the inauguration of that institutional change would have relied on a function of comedy that must have been more or less different from the functions of the festival's already established parts. Second, the function of comedy in the 80s must have been conceived as complementing and thereby enhancing the functions of the already existing components of the festival (at the Lenaia, institutionalization of both comedy and tragedy came late and was heavily influenced by the long established procedures at the City Dionysia).

If one has to generalize with regard to tragedy (however grossly simplifying), its discourse will appear to be *problematic* in that it diagnoses problems within the system of commonly accepted norms,[78] thereby challenging it. Tragedy takes plots from myth but stages this material in a way apt to point to behavior, situations etc. that potentially endanger the polis' system of values.[79] If so, the audience's response, by judging the 'mythical' actions and their rhetorical justification or criticism on stage, would have been concerned primarily with their own norms of behavior.[80] By the nearly complete lack of authoritative or consistent evaluation of any given

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[75] Some assume that both genres serve the same function: cf., e. g., Mann (n. 1) 123 f.

[76] Cf. J. J. Winkler, "The Ephebes' Song: *Tragoidia* and Polis", in: Zeitlin, Winkler (n. 32) 49.

[77] Perhaps because of political reasons: cf. Landfester (n. 6) 30.

[78] P. Hardie, "Virgil and Tragedy", in: Ch. Martindale (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge 1997) 313 also applies the term "problematic" to Greek tragedy.

[79] Cf. Ch. Pelling, "Tragedy and Ideology", in: idem (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford 1997) 225 ff.; H. Lee, "The Dionysia: Instrument of Control or Platform for Critique", in: D. Papenfuß, V. M. Strocka (eds.), *Gab es das Griechische Wunder*? (Mainz 2001) 79. Konstan (n. 30) 43 applies this pattern to comedy.

[80] In general, cf. Ch. Meier, "Kultur als Absicherung der attischen Demokratie", in: M. Sakellariou (ed.), *Démocratie athénienne et culture* (Athen 1996) 207–209.

action or argument within the confines of tragedy (the author of which has vanished and left nobody but individuals arguing on their *own*, subjective behalf), the audience is virtually forced to discuss the play's 'meaning'.[81] Because of this problematic impact, at last, by distinguishing different possible situations, qualifications and solutions, the audience will achieve a deeper understanding of its own social norms. To give some simplified instances of this principle of putting social norms to the test (in all cases, we should keep our mind on the improbability of the ensuing conflicts): Sophocles' *Oedipus rex* puts a man on stage who has innocently committed the most offensive crimes one can think of and who, in addition, has become leader of a polis which he once had saved, but is now threatening to pollute.[82] We might think of *Medea's* challenging of women's accepted roles. The famous first stasimon of Sophocles' *Antigone* (πολλὰ τὰ δεινά…) challenges precisely the above mentioned Athenian 'awareness of ability'.[83] There is hardly a tragedy in which we do not come across such examinations of accepted views in nearly every scene or monologue. Admittedly, all these instances of tragedy's problematic impact add up to nothing but single aspects of the plays. On the other hand, every single tragedy shows many such challenges, on different levels of plot and argument. Therefore, I am tempted to see tragedy as a cluster of problematic challenges, aiming at inducing the audience to work at an actualization of their system of polis-related values (even those few tragedies that end with an overt affirmation of the polis, e. g. the *Oresteia*,[84] or with aetiologies for cults of the Athenians' present[85] or those celebrating Athens as asylum, e. g. the two *Supplices*, reach this state by highly problematic solutions of the plot and are never free from subversive overtones).[86] Incidentally, as an objection to this view, one cannot assert that tragedy, as Aristotle wrote,[87] results in an οἰκεία ἡδονή, i. e. is estimated by the audience as entertaining.[88] Not only is entertainment not averse to prob-

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[81] Similarly Lee (n. 79) 82 f.

[82] See Seaford (n. 28) 42.

[83] Meier (n. 53) 295–301, 311.

[84] For the celebration of Athens in tragedy Rösler (n. 33) 18–21.

[85] E. g., Ch. Meier, "Die politische Identität der Griechen", in: O. Marquard, K. Stierle (eds.), *Identität* (München 1979) 390.

[86] See now J. Grethlein, *Asyl und Athen. Die Konstruktion kollektiver Identität in der griechischen Tragödie* (Stuttgart – Weimar 2003) 433–443.

[87] Aristot. *Poet.* 14. 1453 b 11.

[88] Griffin (n. 21) 55, 60.

lematic challenges, but rather these are an integral part of it. Of course, in order to entertain a given audience of citizens, tragedy's problematic aspects are not supposed to *abolish* their traditional norms, but rather to rebuild and re-enhance them by inducing the spectators to think about what they had previously taken for granted.

Above, I have claimed that Old Comedy was an affirmative discourse concerned with civic identity. The ridiculing of real persons, indirect affirmation and civic laughter are all geared towards the enactment of the polis' identity in front of its citizens.[89] Now, it has often been maintained that Old Comedy and tragedy were showing formal features which may be understood as contrary or complementary.[90] When looking at the respective functions of both of these forms of drama we suddenly recognize also their functions to be complementary: tragedy evidently has a problematic effect which means its impact will have caused a limited feeling of uncertainty with regard to basic norms of behavior. However, it is pivotal to my argument that such a feeling of uncertainty would have never led to a *critical* view of these norms. Rather, the poets must have aimed at a renewed or improved certainty of these unwritten laws of social behavior. Furthermore, that tragedy as a genre was, if anything, supposed to affirm the polis seems obvious from the simple fact that, as an official festival, both City Dionysia and Lenaia were meant to be institutional affirmations, proud presentations of the polis' self-image, her wealth and power.[91] It is my impression that comedy, by its own affirmative purpose, was meant to balance the problematic effect of tragedy.

If tragedy and comedy really are functional complements within the frame of the theatrical festival, their impact, taken together, may be described as a complex affirmation, a direct affirmation by comedy, an indirect one by tragedy.[92] By embedding both dramatic genres in an in-

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[89] Similarly, Kloss (n. 60) 87 shows that comedy was offering to the audience a check of its self-image.

[90] Cf. Landfester (n. 19) 278, 289; esp. O. Taplin, "Fifth-century Tragedy and Comedy. A *Synkrisis*", *JHS* 106 (1986) *passim*; cf. Redfield (n. 66) 318.

[91] *Pace* S. Goldhill, "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology", in: Zeitlin, Winkler (n. 32) 115, 124–126, who looks at tragedy as generally questioning the polis' ideological base; similar to my argument Pelling (n. 79) 234 f.; Heath (n. 54) 244.

[92] As follows from what I try to show here, I do not subscribe to a Bakhtinian reading of either drama or festival in Athens: cf. W. Rösler, "Bakhtin und die Karnevalskultur im antiken Griechenland", *QUCC* 23 (1986) 25–44; Möllendorff

stitutionally fixed frame as to time, place and audience, the festival made sure that both impacts were always combined. In passing, I wish to hint at the possible inclusion of the festivals' remaining mimetic components into this model. To judge by the scarce relics, satyr-play might have presented to the audience a cheerful counter-world of mythic travesty. Such a counter-world would have affirmed, at least implicitly, the sociopolitical structures of contemporary Athens. Put briefly, dithyramb as a heroic narrative highlighted episodes from the mythic past, somehow relevant to contemporary Athens (however, not in a problematic way).[93]

If we look at drama and dithyramb as mimetic systems of signs[94] supposed to exert an affirmative impact upon the audience, we may ask ourselves whether these were the only affirmative systems of signs at Athens. Obviously, the answer is no. The notion of a 'system of signs' could enable us to compare drama with institutions of the polis that have always been investigated separately as to their respective functions. E. g., the ἐπιτάφιοι, i. e. public speeches for the war-dead, invoke a generically standardized range of notions which obviously are meant to have an affirmative impact.[95] Furthermore, at Athens we may find more systems of signs with similarly affirmative functions using quite different media in order to convey their 'message': some of them are based on actions instead of mimesis.[96] I would expect that we might discover action-based systems of signs in many rituals. Finally, the polis uses iconic systems of signs to represent itself, as, e. g., statues (obviously, Harmodius and Aristogeiton representing the overthrow of tyranny and so the coming-to-be of the

(n. 17) 73–109; W. R. Connor, "Festival and Democracy", in: Sakellariou (n. 80) 89; Bierl (n. 48) 363; similarly to my approach Henderson (n. 32) 274, 286 f.; idem (n. 2) 266 f.

[93] For satyr-play, see B. Seidensticker, "Einleitung", in: R. Krumeich e. a. (eds.), *Das griechische Satyrspiel* (Darmstadt 1999) 38 f.; P. Voelke, "Formes et fonctions du risible dans le drame satyrique", in: M.-L. Desclos (ed.), *Le rire des Grecs. Anthropologie du rire en Grèce ancienne* (Grenoble 2000) 106 f.; for dithyramb cf. R. Osborne, "Competitive Festivals and the Polis: A Context for Dramatic Festivals at Athens", in: Sommerstein e. a. (n. 22) 31; Zimmermann (n. 17) 20.

[94] The notion of a "system of signs" has been developed by F. de Saussure (cf. W. Nöth, *Handbuch der Semiotik* [Stuttgart – Weimar 2000] 72 ff.).

[95] Henderson (n. 2) 255 even takes comedy and "oratory" to be functional complements, which in my opinion means to ignore their respective contexts.

[96] E. g., torch races. Cf. Osborne (n. 92) 24, 27; survey of rituals featuring torch races given by L. Deubner, *Attische Feste* (Darmstadt ^{3}1969 [1932]) 258 *s. v.* "Fackellauf".

present polis), iconic programs at official buildings (Gigantomachies, the frieze at the Parthenon).[97] All these systems of signs convey and affirm different aspects of the self-image of the polis.

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«Птицы» Аристофана, поставленные в 414 г., обычно интерпретируются как комедия с преимущественно критической установкой по отношению к афинской политике. Однако образ главного героя комедии построен таким образом, что он, несомненно, притягивает зрительские симпатии. В ситуации, когда каждый афинянин ждал вестей из Сицилии, разыгранная в «Птицах» история торжества утопического предприятия должна была поддержать веру афинян в успех. Позиция Аристофана предстает, таким образом, позицией солидарности и поддержки. Можно показать, что такого рода позиция вообще характерна и существенна для древней аттической комедии.

[97] As to statues and buildings T. Hölscher, "Images and Political Identity: The Case of Athens", in: Boedeker, Raaflaub (n. 2) 158 ff., 173 ff.; Hölkeskamp (n. 29) 5, 24; in general, Meier (n. 80) 216–218.