

The Uncanny Transformation: Laughter and the Unconscious in Aristophanes

This paper will discuss Aristophanes' comedies *The Birds* and *The Thesmophoriazousai* in order to show the transformative power of laughter, and its ability to alter the world of Athens both in the microcosm of Aristophanic comedy and in the macrocosm of society. Aristophanes characters are not stable beings, they shift alliances, change gender, swap statuses (Zeitlin 1990, 1981, Ober 1998, Duncan 2006, Platter 2007). Laughter is both physical act (Critchley 2002) and psychological exploration (Bataille 1965 and Royle 2003). Plato expressed grave doubt about the wisdom of engaging in laughter due to these two effects: that it tends to get (physically) out of hand and that, in laughter, we are at risk of entirely losing ourselves (psychologically) in the wild abandon of laughter (Rep. III 388d-389a) (Halliwell 1991). Indeed, Aristophanes' characters behave *as if they are experiencing these effects of laughter*. First, they, and the audience, are surprised by a lewd or erotic revelation, such as the depilation of Mnesilochus in *The Thesmophoriazousae* and the sensual dance of Procne in *The Birds*.

In an early scene of *The Thesmophoriazousae*, Mnesilochus undergoes a radical transformation from an Athenian man to an Athenian woman and participant in the Thesmophoria. The process of disguising Mnesilochus provides ample opportunities for the audience to burst into laughter. The mirth caused by both Mnesilochus physical position (bent over, exposed to the audience) and depilation, are instances of Freudian *unheimlich* laughter. Something that is familiar has become unfamiliar. Depilation, a normal activity for Greek women has been subverted by its use on a man. And something that is hidden has been revealed, namely Mnesilochus' genitals. The laughter of the audience at this scene is an example of the collective whole laughing together and experiencing theatrical telepathy with each other.

The laughter of the audience in *The Birds* pre-transformation scene is slightly different from the scene in *The Thesmophoriazousae*. Like the audience at *The Thesmophoriazousae*, *The Birds* viewers would have laughed together at the antics of Euelpides as he jokes about parting Procne's legs and peeling her like an egg (striping her) so that he can kiss her, creating an audience wide theatrical telepathy. However the structure of the scene in *The Birds* is organized differently than the gender transformation in *The Thesmophoriazousae*, Euelpides and Peisetaerus, serve as the audience for Procne's performance and are in the same position as the audience of the play. This parallel role allows the audience to go through the scene as the characters do, both groups are spectators and they laugh together. Bataille writes, "Seeing laughter, hearing laughter, I *participate from within* the emotion of the one who laughs. It is this emotion experienced from within which, communicating itself to me, laughs within me". The audience through this Bataillian experience of laughter is pulled into the world of the play, experiencing theatrical telepathy Euelpides and Peisetaerus as well, so that they (the audience) laugh from within in the play.

Then, after this destabilization, the characters transform, things *get out of hand* and they *lose themselves altogether*. At the comedic climax of *The Birds* scene, right after Euelpides fails

to kiss Procne, Tereus appears to lead the two Athenians away to consume a magical root and transform into birds. Likewise, several lines after Mnesilochus' depilation and exposure Euripides exclaims, “ὄρα μὲν οὐτοσὶ καὶ δὲ γυνή τ' ἔδος, man, you have a female shape indeed!”; the gender transformation is complete. Now the audience is in stitches, and the danger of laughter that Plato cautioned against is apparent. The laughter that initiates the species and gender transformations in *The Birds* and *The Thesmophoriazousai* cause Mnesilochus, Euelpides and Peisetaerus to lose something essential to their status and undergo downwardly mobile transformations. These characters are not simply disguised, as many scholars have argued, but changed by the destabilizing, hazardous laughter of the audience.

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