A Tyrant's Journey:

Peisetairos, Alcibiades, and the Seduction of Persuasion

The *Birds* of Aristophanes has been described as little more than utopian fantasy by scholars who - as evidence for their apolitical reading - cited the lack of direct invective, the desirable nature of the events, and the positive treatment of the successful protagonist. I will argue that, it is exactly this fantastical narrative structure, as well as the apparent success of the character Peisetairos, that carry the political content of the *Birds.* This study sets the main character of Peisetairos into an evolutionary schema that follows his progression from ordinary Athenian, to a demagogue, and finally to a tyrant. The idea of a an anti-Athenian paradise is addressed by ending each of these sections with an analysis of the types of utopia (using the categories of Konstan 1997) being described, and how they change with Peisetairos' character development. The audience is meant to sympathize with Peisetairos and cheer his successes up to the end, but they have been cheering their own descent into servitude. The ending only seems desirable until the audience reflects on both it, and their own complicity in the downfall.

Aristophanes elaborates on his previous complaints about demagogues, but more obliquely than in previous plays. The poet shifts from the low-born opportunists like Cleon to the sophisticly-trained young aristocrats who came to the fore following the Peace of Nicias, Alcibiades particularly. The rhetorical hallmark of these demagogues, and Alcibiades most of all, was the appeal to emotion. The passions of the masses, when harnessed, was a powerful force, as all Athenians witnessed in the lead-up to the Sicilian Expedition a year prior.

Starting as a regular Athenian, Peisetairos wants to escape what William Arrowsmith called the πολυπραγμοσύνη ("meddlesomeness") of the Athenians (1973), who, according to the Corinthians in

Thucydides 1.70, cannot abide an "unmeddlesome" peace (*ἡσυχίαν ἀπράγμονα*). He is specifically looking for an unmeddlesome place (*τόπον ἀπράγμονα*, line 44), but like most Athenians, he decries πολυπραγμοσύνη despite embodying it himself.

When faced with an opportunity, Peisetairos cannot ignore his own ambitions, and so uses the rhetorical ability of a demagogue to arouse meddlesomeness in the gullible birds. He flatters, creates a false sense of entitlement, and entices them with visions of empire. It is in this stage of the play that Peisetairos is first named, and when he begins to embody Alcibiades the most clearly, especially in respect to the speech impediment explored by Michael Vickers (1989).

In the third and final stage, Peisetairos is clearly shown as a tyrant. All decisions are made by him, despite saying that they were made unanimously (1015). He revokes all previous promises of a place without rules, and instead expels anyone who could challenge his authority. He even threatens to smash voting jars (1053), and, eats birds who supposedly opposed his rule (1583-1584 and 1688). Peisetairos achieves a victory that is as sacrilegious as it is hilariously improbable: overpowering Zeus and becoming the king of the cosmos; however, Aristophanes here no longer alludes primarily to Alcibiades, but to Peisistratos, whose name is reminiscent of the protagonist's and invokes images of the Athenian tyrants.

The conflict of this play centers on a search for paradise. Peisetairos seeks and finds an anomian utopia (one with no laws), and - as he becomes a demagogue - he advocates for establishing an antinomian one (which has the social orders reversed). After achieving the power he sought, he subtly shifts his objectives toward to a eunomian utopia, where "proper" laws are set by him to secure order and his rule. After clearly becoming a tyrant, the utopia is now a megalonomia, where all rules are stretched out of recognition. These changes dovetail exactly with Peisetairos' progression as a leader.

As Peisetairos escapes Athenian πολυπραγμοσύνη, his inner meddlesomeness compels him to stir the passions of others as Alcibiades does in Thucydides' later account, calling for an empire without end. The more he succeeds, the more power he is given, creating a cycle of conquest. Aristophanes is taking the exuberant claims of demagogues, such as those of Alcibiades leading to the Sicilian Expedition of 415, to their logical conclusion, asking "what if they deliver what they claim?" The result is at first glance hilarious and escapist, until one realizes that, even with such success, the fantasy subtly turns into a nightmare for all but the tyrant.

Selected Works Cited

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