

Literary Wars in Aristophanes *Birds*

In *Birds* Peisetairus' new city in the sky attracts a would-be immigrant, whom most of the manuscripts identify as the dithyrambic poet Kinesias (at any rate, he self-identifies as a dithyrambic poet at *Birds* 1403-04). Kinesias hopes to become a bird and so from his new home in the sky be better positioned to pluck airy, incorporeal preludes from the clouds that surround Cloud-Cuckooland (1383-85). His first words invoke his powers of flight and the delicate wings he longs for. His diction, therefore, suggests that he is a good candidate for the city of birds, while corresponding to the aetherial stereotypes of dithyrambic poetry generally:

ἀναπέτομαι δὴ πρὸς Ὀλυμπον πτερόγεσσι κούφαις

πέτομαι δ' ὁδὸν ἄλλοτ' ἐπ' ἄλλαν μελέων—

Truly I fly up to Olympus on slender wings,

And I fly upon another path of song. (1272-73)

Our initial impression of the poetry attributed to Kinesias is that it matches the aspects of dithyrambic poets that are mocked elsewhere in comedy. These men are “composers of convoluted songs” in *Clouds* (333), who “write about the ‘fearful onset of rain-filled clouds edged with twists of radiance’ and ‘aerial aquifers, crook-taloned birds floating in air’ and ‘waters raining from dewy clouds’” (335-48, Sommerstein translation).

Yet despite first appearances, Kinesias' words are not *mere* dithyrambic nonsense. In fact, they are not even dithyramps. As the scholiast makes clear, the first line is much older, an adaptation of the sixth-century poet Anacreon (378). What can we draw from this intertextual couplet and how best to interpret it within *Birds*? First of all, it should be noted that unlike some instances of quotation in Aristophanes Anacreon is not named, nor is the attribution confirmed,

later. This means that in composing the lines Aristophanes could anticipate at least two audiences. The first consisted of *cognoscenti* who could be assumed to know their Anacreon. The second were less culturally aware. Presumably, this second group would have taken the two lines at face value, a parody the kind of airy nonsense typical of dithyrambic poets in *Clouds* and elsewhere. Let us consider the implications of this bifurcation of the audience. Spectators who do not understand inappropriateness of Kinesias' words understand the lines as mockery directed at the dithyramb's well-established vacuity and see Kinesias as the embodiment of that those characteristics. For those who recognize Kinesias' source, however, the lines take on a different and much richer significance. A striking characteristic of the dithyramb, as it was practiced in the time of Aristophanes, is its emphasis on novelty. Here in *Birds*, however, we are see, however, that according to Aristophanes not only the dithyramb of Kinesias is doubly flawed: it is not only cryptic, but a thoroughly unoriginal rehash of Anacreon. By putting the words of a poet dead for over a century into his mouth Aristophanes implies that the self-proclaimed novelty of the dithyramb is completely spurious.

There is a further significance to the quotation, in that it has implications not only for the reputation of Kinesias but of Anacreon as well. Unlike Homer, Anacreon is not generally freighted with any particular authority, oracular or otherwise. He is a poet of the symposium, the feast, and of the wracking pains of eros. He nevertheless represents a poetic tradition that antedates not only Aristophanes but the introduction of comedy in Athens. In *Birds*, however, the work of Anacreon is not treated as old-fashioned, as it likely was at *Banqueters* fr. 225, but perversely as ultra-modern. Far from representing of a style of poetry that is ancient and venerable, Anacreon in the mouth of Kinesias becomes just another incoherent dithyrambic poet. Temporal precedence becomes skewed as well. By ventriloquizing Kinesias, Anacreon, who

seems to have died early in the fifth century, becomes not the great representative of sixth-century symposiastic poetry but of the dithyramb, the genre that Aristophanes treats as its degenerate successor. Anacreon, in this rendition, is no more a great precursor of Aristophanes, but his childish contemporary.

Works Cited

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