

The Silence of the Shuttle: The Voiceless Procne and the Absent Philomela
in Aristophanes' *Birds*

In the *Birds*, Aristophanes creates an odd, jarring sequel to Sophocles' *Tereus* through the figures of Tereus and Procne: Procne and Tereus are living together among the birds as a happily reunited couple; their dead son Itys is only mentioned as a figure to be mourned; and the other events that made up the plot of Sophocles' now fragmentary tragedy—Tereus' rape of Procne's sister Philomela, Procne's subsequent murder of her own son—are not mentioned at all. Procne, furthermore, never speaks, and Philomela is completely absent, her name not even appearing in Aristophanes' comedy.

In this paper, I argue that, through Procne's voicelessness and Philomela's conspicuous absence, Aristophanes sets up Procne as a double for her sister, and this doubling is emblematic of the larger narrowing of women's roles in the comic utopia of the *Birds*. Procne is also a double in one other, important respect: Although she is introduced as Tereus' wife, the details given about her costuming indicate that she is costumed as a prostitute—an *auletris*, more specifically—and Tereus seems unconcerned with presenting her as an object of sexual fantasy to the other male birds. Thus, she occupies the roles of both a wife and a prostitute. This telescoping of female roles is part of the atmosphere of sexual freedom that Peisetairos and Euelpides hope for when they go to live among the birds; Euelpides hopes to live in a city where another man will scold him for *not* fondling his beautiful young son while leaving the gymnasium (*Birds* 137-142), and they find in Tereus a man who invites them to "play" (παίσσωμεν, 660) with his beautiful and scantily clad wife. But this sexual freedom is embodied in the figure of Procne, and the conspicuous omission of several of the most important details of Procne's story reveals the dark side of the birds' sexual liberation.

Aristophanes' handling of the myth of Tereus and Procne, and the *Birds*' relationship with Sophocles' *Tereus*, have been touched on in much of the scholarship on the play. These issues were handled especially persuasively and comprehensively by Dobrov 1993, who argues that Aristophanes converts both the character and the myth of Tereus from the tragic mode into the comic in "an exuberant improvisation on the themes and situations of one of the most memorable tragedies of the fifth century" (Dobrov 1993: 228). But Dobrov's article is focused on Tereus, not Procne, and much of the scholarship focused on Procne specifically examines more technical aspects of the performance, such as costume (Romer 1993; Compton-Engle 2007) and music (Barker 2004). In this paper, I focus on the handling of the myth of Procne in particular, and the role of this myth in shaping the sexual politics of the land of the birds. In doing so, I follow the work of several scholars who have written about the play's utopian themes and the questions it raises about the ideal organization of a *polis* and about the ideal social rules and customs in it (Arrowsmith 1973; Bowie 1993; Dobrov 1997; Romer 1997). The questions of sexual mores and gender politics, at least in the early part of the play, are brought into focus through the character of Procne and through Aristophanes' uncanny sequel to her myth.

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