

Aetiologies of Eros: The *Birds* and Plato's *Symposium*

Does Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium* represent something Aristophanic? Certain elements—the general comedic tone, the vividness of the tale, the parody, the veiled insults—evoke the historical Aristophanes in a general way, but a direct connection has so far eluded scholars. As a result even the comedy comes under question. Interpreters tease out dark meanings, making particular use of the reference to the “Net of Hephaestus” in 192d2-e9, suggesting that this reference undercuts the apparent “happy ending” of the speech. I suggest that Plato composed the myth told by Aristophanes in the *Symposium* by following the example of myths in Aristophanes' own plays. In fact, comparing the myth in the *Symposium* alongside the myth from *Birds* (an aetiology of Eros written by the poet himself) shows significant stylistic similarities, not only in the formation of the myth, but also in its use within the work. Plato introduces an Aristophanic myth into the *Symposium* to clue his readers into the function and interpretation for the speech.

Scholars have analyzed Aristophanes's speech in the *Symposium* in terms of genre, political ideas, philosophical stances, but never in terms of Aristophanic myth. Dover's analysis remains the most influential work on the speech, and he assigns the speech to the category of Aesopic or subliterate folktale. With his sights on the political ramifications, Ludwig also provides insightful analysis as to the function of the speech within the larger argument of the *Symposium*. He does not, however, compare the myth to the myths of the comedies, but directs his comparison of Plato's Aristophanes to protagonists of those comedies (1.2). In contrast, Saxonhouse believes that Plato uses the myth to force the comic poet to tell a grotesque, tragic, and yet undignified story (18), zeroing in on the Net of Hephaestus reference. Hooper, responding to Saxonhouse, acknowledges other similarities with the comedies of the real Aristophanes, such as the portrayal of deities as selfish and dependent upon human sacrifices, but ultimately follows Dover's characterization as Aesopic folk-tale (570n11). I believe that a comparison between the speech of the Platonic Aristophanes and the myths of the poet Aristophanes,

specifically the one in the *parabasis* of *Birds*, is legitimate and is supported by many of the observations of Dover and these other scholars regarding the composition of the tale. In particular I reference Moulton's analysis of the comic myth-making in Aristophanes to draw comparisons between the myth in *Birds* and the speech in the *Symposium*.

Firstly, the speech is composed along similar lines to the myth in *Birds*: both are a pastiche of previous Greek literature, ranging from Hesiod to Homer to pre-Socratics to tragedy. Both reinterpret these elements from past literature in new ways to lend credence to their stories. Interpreting the speech of Aristophanes as linked to his own comedic myths firstly explains a great deal of the function of the speech within the play. Moulton describes how the myth in *Birds* has a two-fold structural function: first is the construction of the past golden age, then follows the vision of utopia. The forward/backward vision operates on two levels as well: the first half of the *parabasis* (676-722) also refers to the earlier arguments of Peisetairos, while the second half previews the resolution of the play (1718ff) through the vignette of the Muses, the Graces, and Apollo (Moulton 224). In the *Symposium*, the speech similarly references the speeches of Phaedrus, Pausanias and Eryximachus, looks to a possible utopia, and sets the stage for Diotima's speech, the resolution of the discussion about Eros. Finally, analyzing the speech in this matter provides a pattern for a positive interpretation of the reference to the Net of Hephaestus. Like Procne in *Birds*, the Net of Hephaestus is metamorphosed, no longer a mockery of evanescent lust but rather a device which shows the strength of our longing for our other half. Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium* moves us, as Plato meant it to, and precisely because it follows in the vein of the poet's own works.

Bibliography

Dover, K. J. "Aristophanes' Speech in Plato's Symposium." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 86, 1966, p. 41-50.

Hooper, Anthony. "The Greatest Hope of All: Aristophanes on Human Nature in Plato's
'Symposium.'" *The Classical Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2013, p. 567-579.

Ludwig, Paul W. *Eros and Polis: Desire and Community in Greek Political Theory*. Cambridge
University Press, 2002.

Moulton, Carroll. "Comic Myth-Making and Aristophanes' Originality." in *Oxford Readings in
Aristophanes*, ed. by Erich Segal, 216-228. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1996.

Saxonhouse, Arlene. "The Net of Hephaestus: Aristophanes' Speech in Plato's *Symposium*."
Interpretation 13.1, 1984, 15-32.