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Bloody Hilarious: Animal Sacrifice in Aristophanic Comedy

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to understand the portrayals of animal sacrifice in the Old Comedy of classical Greece, a genre commonly considered for vulgarity, personal invective, and roots far removed from sacred acts. Recognizing that even fictional representations of sacrifice are based on real religious ritual, and that Old Comedy had a responsibility to present to the polis a reflection of its own attitudes and behaviors, comic sacrifice scenes become a valuable mode of insight on a culture that we struggle to understand through limited evidence. Approaching the plays with this in mind uncovers a richer and more complex relationship between comedy and sacrifice than might initially be expected.

Before being able to appreciate the meaning of sacrifice scenes in the plays, the first step is to establish a relationship between comedy and ritual. This study considers a progression of ideas around the identity of Greek drama, beginning with Aristotle's *Poetics* and moving through the centuries as scholars identify the likely formative influences of comedy. After establishing comedy as a valid participant in the religious discourse of classical Athens, this study considers a progression of theories about the religious forces behind animal sacrifice as well as how the Greeks incorporated and expressed those forces. From Mircea Eliade's concept of the sacred to Walter Burkert's use of sacrifice to peer into the Greek psyche, we come to understand the interplay of ritual and performance as a culture communicates its own beliefs and attitudes.

Among the extant comedies of Aristophanes, *Frogs*, *Peace*, and *Birds* receive major focus for their provocative use of sacrifice and related ritual behavior. Encounters with ritual practices move the protagonists toward their end goals, and control over animal sacrifice is an indicator of each character's power. Sacrifice in each of these cases is presented not as a reverent act but a tool to be manipulated to achieve human aims. Aristophanes is using comedy's unique license to express a more practical understanding of the human benefits of sacrifice and to demonstrate the shifting attitudes of the polis, away from reliance on traditional models and toward a preference for human action.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Ritual sacrifice is a pervasive presence in our evidence of classical Athens, represented on iconography, in formal records of religious festivals, and in the extant literature. This recurrence suggests the great importance of sacrifice in ancient Greece. Yet the limited surviving evidence provides just enough detail to inspire ongoing speculation about this widespread cultural manifestation of a religion that had no church, no formal hierarchical structure, and no authoritative documents. Outside of a core outline consisting of pre-kill, kill, and post-kill,¹ the performance of animal sacrifice can vary from time to time and place to place. To cobble together a sense of what the sacrifice contained and what purpose it served, we rely on the trio of sources listed above, but for any depth of detail about how the sacrifice was performed and what motives and expectations surrounded it we are particularly dependent upon the literature. Epic gives us the mythic origins, while drama gives us the more human dimensions.

Stage plays give us characters who voice their concerns, follow certain prescribed steps, and deal with the consequences (intended and unintended) of sacrifice. They present the act as both a divinely ordained religious event and a practical tool for achieving certain ends in the mortal world. This dual perspective offers perhaps our best chance of understanding sacrifice's role in Greek religion and culture. Accordingly, sacrifice scenes and sacrificial language in Greek drama have been analyzed in-depth for clues that might contribute to a firm, long-term understanding of sacrifice. I use the phrase "Greek drama"

1. Most succinctly identified by F.T. van Straten.

here deliberately: first, for its inclusive value, as it encompasses tragedy with its appended satyr play and comedy; and second, to demonstrate a bias that causes readers to lean towards tragedy when the discussion turns to matters of sacrifice, religious meaning, and cultural significance. In this well explored territory comedy is often overlooked, though its sacrifice scenes are not without value.²

Sacrifice occurs in comedy, conveyed in great detail and often playing an integral role in the plot. Surely its multiple occurrences, playing to a vast public audience in the sacred setting of the festival, can contribute something of value to our understanding of what sacrifice meant. To dismiss comic sacrifice out of hand would be to deliberately limit our understanding of a topic that the scholarship still struggles to fully grasp. I have found no article offering explicit reasoning that would invalidate an approach that looks to pull something instructive from Attic comedy's sacrifice scenes. So it seems we must build a case to show that a thorough study of comic sacrifice is worth the effort. A few basic things will be important to this endeavor: to show sacrifice as an integral part of the structure of comedy—that is, as something more than a component in a grab bag of stock jokes; to show that the use of humor does not negate the value of its subject but rather casts it in a different light; to show that a comic treatment does not preclude substantive expressions of religion; and to assert that comedy forms one indispensable part of a dramatic tradition carried out in the sacred setting of the Greek festival.

2. As a recent symptom of the condition at hand, adjacent articles in Christopher A. Farraone's and F.S. Naiden's *Greek and Roman Animal Sacrifice: Ancient Victims, Modern Observers* approach this point from both sides. Albert Henrichs, in "Animal Sacrifice in Greek Tragedy: Ritual, Metaphor, and Problematizations," says, "there has been a proliferation of books and articles on the function of ritual in Greek tragedy" (183). James Redfield, in "Animal Sacrifice in Comedy: An Alternative Point of View," is quick to make the point that "little attention has been paid to animal sacrifice in comedy" (167).

Upon this foundation an argument will be made to show that the multiple occasions to laugh at sacrifice in Attic Comedy indicate an apparent obligation to balance the religious tenor of fifth century BCE Athens. This analysis will take into account scenes of religious significance from Aristophanes plays. It will look in-depth at *Frogs*, *Peace*, and *Birds*, taking into account the full significance of plot, character, and comic tropes in three plays that thoroughly embody religious elements. The content of the plays will be weighed alongside relevant scholarship on comedy, religious ritual, and festival. While individual pieces of scholarship in these areas do not focus specifically on the occurrence of comic sacrifice in classical Greece, when taken together they form a complementary argument. When applied to comedy's sacrifice scenes they offer a depth of insight into Athens' religious thought and practice unexpected and largely unattended due to the light nature of the genre.

Immediate objections may come from the perception that Attic comedy is simply a collection of jokes roped together by a thin plot. But the notion of the genre as a loose compilation of unrelated burlesque scenes has been in question since the early twentieth century. Francis Macdonald Cornford's *Origins of Attic Comedy* identified a common plot structure in the extant comedies, where the sacrifice marks the important transition from the agon in the first phase of the play to the collective gathering of the feast in the second phase (3). Cornford notes that much of the action in the second act of early comedies took place during the feast, and that as the form evolved (beginning, notably, with *Birds*) the sacrifice became marked by interruptions from various intruders (3). Two conclusions can be drawn: first, sacrifice scenes were put to deliberate use in comedy, and second, as the genre evolved so too did the content of the scenes. By introducing and creatively dispatching recognizable members of Attic society, the sacrifice scene in the play becomes a venue for contemporary

issues.³ That is, what happens during the sacrifice is a useful measure for how the playwrights adapted to the changing attitudes and expectations of their audience.

So sacrifice in comedy had a role to play, but does it have meaning beyond its use as a formulaic transition piece from the agon to the concluding feast? A simple reading of the plays would indicate that it does. Comic sacrifices, like their tragic counterparts, do present the act as a religious occurrence with the power to change the course of events by the will of the gods.⁴ One example for illustration is the appearance of Prometheus in *Birds* (lines 1494 ff.). F.E. Romer's study, "Atheism, Impiety and the Limos Melios in *Birds*," takes Prometheus to be a reminder of the mythic origin of the act (361). Romer also reminds us that "Aristophanes can, should, and does work on more than one level of meaning whenever he so desires" (352). Couple this with Cornford's recognition that the sacrifice is the primary tool for comedy's bumbling protagonists to bring about a new social order, and the comic sacrifice suddenly has both mythic significance and purpose.

If we allow sacrifice as a part of comedy, and something more than a simple component, we then have to account for its use as parody. In this regard comic sacrifice exists as a response to a more serious and earnest counterpart in tragedy. It is mockery, explicitly intended to get a laugh. At first glance it seems possible to dismiss a serious examination of the elements of comedy on that statement alone. Such a line of thinking, though, would rely on an assumption that creating the conditions to laugh at a serious subject strips the meaning from that subject. Actually, the comedy in this case relies on meaning. It relies on audience awareness of the tragic counterpart, of the common points between the

3. S. Douglas Olson's "Names and Naming in Aristophanes," is a useful example in aligning characters with real figures in Athens' public perception at the time of the plays.

4. Whether or not, and how, that potential is realized by the end of the play could be seen as one definitive difference between comedy and tragedy.

original and the parody, and of an independent, intrinsic value of the subject of the joke which allows the subject to transcend genre.

Comedy draws a laugh by catching the audience off guard with such understood, transcendent truths shown in a different, surprising or challenging way. With this in mind it becomes worth noting which aspects the playwright chooses to draw attention to in order to inspire laughter. The playwright does this by disrupting the usual portrayal of events and by lowering the prestige of components that are assumed to have high value, thus drawing attention to elements that normally go unquestioned in other genres. For example, A.M. Bowie in *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual, and Comedy* asserts that in the introduction to *Birds*, the implements carried by the characters are ambiguously identified, so that they could either be common cooking items or the items used to perform sacrifice (152). Such ambiguity may raise questions about the assumed importance of the tools of sacrifice when they are likened in form and function to the common tools used to prepare a daily meal.

Further than casting old things in new light, comedy provides a coded way of saying things that the other genres cannot say. Simon Goldhill and Charles Platter each build a case based on Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* as they comment on the unique license provided by the Greek festival to discard the standard reverence for the gods and the heroic past.⁵ Comedy speaks not of the idealized version of sacrifice from the heroic age but of the worldly version the audience knows as tainted and made imperfect by human participation. The victim does not go willingly; bones and fat are not suitable sustenance for the gods. Comedy then holds a certain degree of practical honesty when dealing with sacrifice, and so may be able to reveal things that tragedy cannot.

5. Goldhill with an essay in *The Poet's Voice: Essays on Poetics and Greek Literature*, and Platter in *Aristophanes and the Carnival of Genres*. Each will be applied more specifically in the following pages.

Comedy's ability to comment on such matters is strengthened when we consider the broader context for presentation of the plays. Though the joke may be vulgar, the festival theater is too sacred a space for what was presented on stage to be devoid of meaning. In *Tragedy and Athenian Religion* (which, despite the title, acknowledges and considers comedy's role in the world of Attic drama), Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood presents stage drama as not just a theater performance but a "ritual occasion" (50). On her theory, the participants welcomed and recognized Dionysos as a presence witnessing the events on the stage (73). In a study that both legitimizes and effectively counterbalances aspects of Sourvinou-Inwood, Anton Bierl gives us *Ritual and Performativity: The Chorus of Old Comedy*. Bierl recognizes a ritual basis for dramatic performance and sees the chorus as the connector from pre-dramatic ritual to organized plays. Comedy in particular, he says, is "determined by ritual points of view" (10). While such ventures into origins and the Greek perspective provide intriguing avenues, they remain hypothetical. It is enough for now to simply recognize the theater as a space where ritual was maintained and communicated.

Comedy and tragedy shared the same space, and so we need to read comedy with the mindset that it was one of two dramatic forms that were part of a social dialogue in a public setting. Bowie's work, for instance, undertakes the study of the Greek festival on the premise that the stage presented an opportunity for the polis to present itself to itself (10). Drama then had a role to play in shaping public opinion, with comedy and tragedy presenting different sides of the public mind. Comedy, a loosening of strictures and an acknowledgment of the at-times banal nature of human activity and existence; tragedy, awe and reverence for a sacred past with prescriptive lessons regarding honor and virtue. The interplay of the genres is highlighted in M.S. Silk's study, "Aristophanic Paratragedy," which instructs us to watch for

meaning in comic moments that echo tragedy (such as sacrifice scenes), and to distinguish such informative moments from instances of simple parody (479). For all of the difference between the genres, comedy is no less a reflection of the society that produced it than tragedy, and as such it naturally communicates certain social characteristics, attitudes, and beliefs that the informed reader will notice.

Doubt may persist from questions that comedy automatically evokes. What to make of Greek religion's most fundamental act when it appears alongside vulgar jokes and crude mockery? How can a consideration of irreverent treatment of sacrifice add to our understanding of Attic life and religion? We must remember that the basic structure of comedy, including the sacrifice scene, has its origins in a significant primal aspect of Greek religion—the communal gathering for a meal around the sacrificial animal. The relationship between early religious ceremony and the birth of the dramatic stage suggests a ritually significant performance phase from which sprang both comedy and tragedy. Sourvinou-Inwood builds a theory on the world *thymele* and its dual meaning as a formal altar and as a platform on which a ritual singer would perform with a chorus, i.e., a precursor to the dramatic stage (143).⁶

By emphasizing the presence of this sacred root and coming to terms with its influence in comedy we can begin to find ways in which the lighter genre could function as a legitimate voice on Greek religion, if only to establish the point that not all comic encounters with the sacred can be dismissed out of hand. This study will set out to present specific examples of sacrifice in comedy that are substantial and complex enough to provide genuine insight on Greek religion. Examples chosen from the extant body of work are particularly effective at re-casting the sacrifice and presenting its individual components in the liberated

6. Multiple uses of *thymele* will be explored in context in a subsequent chapter.

setting of the festival stage. The first case will be *Frogs* for its explicit focus on Greek religion. With its divine characters and underworld setting, the play provides an introduction to the relationship between comedy and the gods. Of particular value, it offers the rich proposition of Dionysos as a character watching a ritual sacrifice made in his honor.

After using *Frogs* to demonstrate comedy's provocative relationship with Greek religion, I will move on to *Peace*. This play uses animal sacrifice as a bargaining tool with one god and later finds the act unsuitable for the newly summoned divine figure of Peace. The play also demonstrates an inarguably proper sacrifice (including an altar, a herd animal, and the motive of pleasing the gods) yet questions its value in a new social order.

After exploring the implications of the comic employment of proper sacrifice in *Peace*, the study will move on to *Birds*, which plays with the relationship between the prescribed act of animal slaughter and common cooking. The play confronts sacrifice immediately and directly, as the protagonist enters with the express intent of depriving the gods of sacrifice's benefits (Bowie 152). In these three plays we see a progression from a divine act performed by the divine, to proper sacrifice deemed no longer worthy, to a dangerously secularized version.

After considering each play in terms of genre, setting, and audience (both past and present), the chosen examples from Aristophanes' work will show new significance of his sacrifice scenes in the larger consideration of Greek religion. This approach will highlight deliberately placed flaws in comic sacrifice, revealing them not as fleeting jokes but rather as instructive representations. The sacrifice presented with comic license on the festival stage allows the audience to confront its own ritual through a new lens and to view critically the component parts of a violent and bloody event.

With this perspective, new questions come to mind and demand answers: What does it mean to set up a ritual sacrifice in a genre laden with profanity and irreverence? What might the characters expect to gain from their sacrifice? What does the audience expect to see? What would it mean for the sacrifice to succeed, both within the plot and within the genre? What does it mean for the sacrifice to fail? How does the setting of the religious festival in which the drama was presented inform these expectations?

Answers to these questions will support the idea that while tragedy—as a morally prescriptive form of Greek literature—offers somber illustrations of ritual sacrifice, comedy’s apparently slipshod versions with their questionable outcomes play to different expectations and compromise the distinctions of sacred and profane. By acknowledging this point, we can get a better grasp of the Attic audience’s tolerance for irreverence and construct a plausible scenario for how such socially accepted transgression would have played an integral role in Greek religious understanding. In the sections that follow, we will look first at a progression of ideas about what Greek comedy is, then at a progression of ideas about what Greek religion is, and finally at examples of religion in comedy.

Chapter II

The Development of Attic Comedy

If comedy could perform such functions, we must then acknowledge an instructive nature more commonly attributed to tragedy. We will need to look at where comedy comes from. This is not to take on the impossible task of identifying a specific moment of origin, but to track down forms that contribute something to what we now know as Old Comedy. We can begin by tracing two essential elements of its identity. The first element encompasses the basics of comic behavior, i.e., insults, sexual and scatological jokes, and mockery of traditional practices. We will think of these as ground-level characteristics that spring from performances and processions in which the players are eye to eye with spectators. The second element is the origin of stage drama, i.e., a structured plot elevated for mass public perception. We will think of traits related to this second element as stage-level characteristics. Both of these elements seem to exist on their own before the advent of comic plays. Aristotle gives us a nice foundation rooted at a time close to the works that we are studying. Modern theorists still rely on his observations, so this seems a good place to start.

In *The Poetics* Aristotle says with some certainty that comedy began with phallic songs (1449a.10-12). Beyond that though there is no formal record to explain how such improvisational performances evolved to the form that we see in Aristophanes' plays. Aristotle explains the lack of a formal record by saying "from the beginning comedy was not treated with respect and went unnoticed" (1449a.37).⁷ His comments on what preceded Aristophanes were a matter of supposition based on existing forms, even with the relatively

7. All translations of Greek text are my own unless otherwise noted.

cozy position of being only a century removed. We must use this same approach of relying on related forms to draw conclusions about the genre's likely origins and a plausible course for its evolution.

We know it did not begin with fifth century Athens. As explained in *The Poetics*, "The performances had certain forms by the time comic poets were known" (1449b.2-4). Aristotle speculates on an influential plot form emerging in Sicily and credits an Athenian named Krates for building its popularity through the use of more generally appealing stories (1449b.7-9). We can safely conclude that there were influences beyond the phallic songs that helped comedy take its more familiar shape.

Lacking a definitive explanation, *The Poetics* resorts to what will become a familiar theme in any deep study of comedy: definition by contrast to tragedy. Aristotle asserts that tragedy is a higher form proceeding from epic, telling of life and action, while comedy follows from the lower phallic songs, imitating people and portraying character types.⁸ Tragedy creates enemies among those who had previously been aligned, while comedy brings enemies (that is, divergent characters with selfish interests) together (1453a.39-43). There is a noteworthy reciprocity here. In many ways these seem to be two sides of the same coin. Such direct contrast confounds a simple explanation that one came from high epic and the other came independently from low phallic songs. Rather than seeing the two as converging conveniently from two very different starting points we may reasonably remain open to the possibility of an additional, common root that fed both genres.

For all of the definition by contrast Aristotle does identify elements of tragedy that are shared with comedy: prologue, episode, exodus, choric song (divided into *parodos* and

8. Aristotle says "tragedy is a representation not of men but of action and life" (1450a 17-18). The "not...but" construction seems to call back to a preceding statement, "comedy is a representation of a lower sort of people" (1449a 31-32).

stasimon) (1452b.16-18). The two genres' interior structure is very much the same; the more superficial aspects are where they really differ. With these elements as a starting point, Aristotle tells us the comic playwright differentiates his play from the tragic counterpart by "putting together a story by using likely events" and then introducing "names that happen to come to mind" (1451b.13-14). The plot will typically bring enemies together (as noted above), while freedom in choosing character names will allow for playful ridicule of certain types familiar to the polis.⁹ The latter aspect seems to have a clear predecessor in the jeering nature of the phallic songs, but the core structure does not. Prologue, episode, exodus, and choric song are crucial plot elements that define both comedy and tragedy, and yet there is no attempt here at identifying an underlying form. So how do we get from phallic songs to the structured plays of Old Comedy?

It will help to know what the phallic songs did and did not offer. Before we move deeper into the scholarship let us look at an example of a phallic song provided by Aristophanes in *Acharnians*.¹⁰ It is worth noting that the oldest of his complete extant plays, i.e., the one closest in time to its preceding form, is the only to feature an unmitigated phallic song. As a younger playwright in a relatively early stage of Old Comedy, he seems to lean on this trusted structure.

Making way onto the scene, the protagonist Dikaiopolis makes it immediately clear that this is a phallic procession as he commands the slave Xanthias to "stand that phallus upright!" (*tòn phallòn orthòn stēsátō*) and refers to his daughter carrying a sacrificial basket

9. A novel plot populated by characters created and named of the playwright's own accord gave comedy a certain dramatic distinction, as well. S. Douglas Olson, in "Names and Naming in Aristophanic Comedy," recognizes that while the characters in a tragedy would be known by the audience from the start, characters in comedy would for the most part be thoroughly unknown. The comic playwright "had no dramatic incentive to name his characters as soon as they appeared" (306). Aristophanes could choose what their names could be, what they would mean, and when to reveal them.

10. The relevant lines for this example are 241-279.

(τὸ kanoûn) (lines 243-44). With his fellow participants thus directed, Dikaiopolis officially begins with a call to Lord Dionysos (O Diónuse déspota) (247). Dikaiopolis then states what he is looking to achieve (a thirty-year peace) and subjects his daughter to some sexual word play before going on to say explicitly that he will sing the phallic song (aísomai to phallikón) (261). In the lines that follow he calls on Phales, “companion to the Bacchic rites” (hetaîre Bakchíou) (263). Dikaiopolis uses the vocative for the phallic god five times in the space of thirteen lines. That is, after an initial invocation of Dionysos, the lesser Phales receives the thrust of the prayer. Aside from one contemporary reference to Lamachos, the general to appear and be lampooned later in the play, Dikaiopolis’ procession-song expresses his desire to enjoy the special brand of elation that Phales provides, which has been in short supply during years of war. The revelry is abruptly brought to an end when the hostile chorus confronts Dikaiopolis.

For a sense of the meaning of the phallic procession in proximity to comedy we turn next to Francis Macdonald Cornford’s *Origin of Attic Comedy*.¹¹ He posits an early ritual procession similar to the structure of the plays in the presence a chorus, a standalone character to speak freely and lead the chorus, and playful verbal abuse (41).¹² Cornford aligns with Aristotle in asserting this last item as “the essential feature of the Old Comedy” (41). Cornford and Aristotle both saw the invective evident in such processions as proof of a relationship to comedy. Of this verbal aspect Cornford says, “There can be no doubt that the element of invective and personal satire which distinguishes the Old Comedy is directly

11. Any attempt to find such an origin, of course, relies on incomplete evidence and is forced to make some tenuous connections. Origin-seeking has gone out of fashion, as it is seen as an impossible task with limited relevance. That said, Cornford’s work places the extant comedies side by side and draws some sound conclusions based on structural similarities and recurring themes.

12. Cornford later points to a relationship between abuse and play as demonstrated etymologically by loídoros (abuse) and ludus (play) (50).

descended from the magical abuse of the phallic procession, just as its obscenity is due to the sexual magic” (50). This idea of a primary progenitor ritual has fallen by the wayside, but we can see in the attempt a consistent strain of concern in scholarship that seeks an ordered transition of a purely ritual form to a purely dramatic form.¹³ The persistence of this idea proves an unmistakable strain of ritual influence in comedy’s makeup.

When we see comedy in this light—and avoid reflexively treating it as a light-hearted break from the more serious concerns of tragedy—we get a more accurate sense of its true identity and in turn stand a better chance of recognizing its multiple strains of influence. Cornford suggests that comedy’s earliest forms may have been basic religious rites centered around what he believes to have been an early approximation of or stand-in for Dionysos: the rough character of Phales (51).¹⁴ Based on his understanding of Phales as a thinly veiled symbolic phallus, Cornford rather confidently asserts, “the protagonist in comedy must originally have been the spirit of fertility himself” (20). Considering the number of times Phales comes up in Dikaiopolis’ song, this is not hard to imagine. Of course the spirit of fertility would be important to a civilization whose existence depended directly on sufficient agriculture, livestock, and growth of their own numbers.

Whatever role the phallic aspect had in comedy, it was only one part in a series of events that took shape as Greek culture developed around the preparations, performance, and celebration of animal sacrifice. Cornford’s posits a three-part order, “(1) a procession to the place of sacrifice; (2) the sacrifice itself; (3) the procession resumed with a Kômos song addressed to Phales” (38). While this is uncertain from a historical perspective, it does come

13. Bierl explores this relationship, weaves together coexisting strains of ritual and theater with the common thread of performance (270).

14. Phales would have been a more thinly veiled symbolic figure. Cornford describes him as “the phallus, barely personified” (20).

across in varying degrees within the plays. We see in *Acharnians* a format loosely situated along these lines. Comedy, though, does consistently embody in its core structure one of the three phases. Cornford sees the agon preceding the parabasis in the plays as “the equivalent” of the sacrifice preceding the phallic song in the rite (103). Built into comedy’s framework then is a micro-representation of the real-world sequence. This gives comedy legitimate ties to the act of sacrifice and strengthens the claim that it inherited traits from more than just the phallic songs.

The mingling of comedy, phallic song, and ritual sacrifice leads us to the next analysis. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood’s *Tragedy and Athenian Religion* looks for the origins of tragedy in religious behavior—but her study inevitably discusses comedy as well, as an inextricable part of the larger shared construct of Greek drama. She initially conceives of comedy as a form that finds its identity by deconstructing tragedy, with the goal of arousing laughter in comedy’s case (6). Again we see a study that determines comedy’s meaning by describing how it works in relation to tragedy. It will be important to think of comedy on its own terms, but her definition at this point does offer something useful. When tragedy is deconstructed for laughs, “it depends on a shift of focus from the...performance and the audience to the poet and the process of composition” (7). The audience was liberated to think about the form itself and how it interacted with the world around it.

Sourvinou-Inwood’s study does define comedy more specifically as she builds a case for an organized performance that grew out from the proceedings around animal sacrifice. Specifically, the sacrifice ritual included narrative hymns sung by a chorus with a designated leader (154). This choral performance gradually separated from the sacrifice it initially celebrated, and the leader took on a level of individual significance suggestive of later

dramatic characters (158-59). Sourvinou-Inwood does set this up as the emergence of what she calls “prototragedy,” but if it truly is the pre-dramatic form she suggests, it must have contributed to the emergence of comedy, too. In this construction comedy can be seen as being generally founded on some of the same religious concerns, and as complementing tragedy’s representation of Greek culture. If a single undistinguished form came from a performance related to sacrifice and later branched out, this may account for the similarities in plot structure noted but not explained by Aristotle.

To add a connective thread between sacrifice and the earliest stage performances, Sourvinou-Inwood presents a small but intriguing bit of linguistic evidence. She makes a case on the dual meaning of *thymele* as both “altar” and “stage.” Liddell and Scott give exactly two meanings for *thymele*: “a place for sacrifice, an altar;” and, “in the Athenian theatre, a platform in the orchestra, on the steps of which stood the leader of the Chorus.” The lexicon entry also gives the root as the unequivocally sacrifice-related *thuō*. Sourvinou-Inwood delves into the reasons for the association. After consulting a multitude of sources on *thymele*, she identifies four interrelated meanings whose sheer coexistence under one word reinforces the close relationship between sacrifice and early stage performance. They are, “(1) an *eschara*-type altar; (2) a table for cutting sacrificial victims; (3) a table on which stood personnel involved in the earliest tragic performance; and (4) a speaker’s platform” (143).¹⁵ If venturing to say that sacrifice gave birth to tragedy or comedy is too far, it is at least possible to see this confluence of meaning as indicating that sacrifice gave rise to a chorus with an elevated leader, and that is enough. It links the two genres at an early phase,

15. On point (3), note prior assertion that a form emerging immediately from sacrifice before genres or organized stage drama had been defined need not only be a precursor to tragedy but could be a forebear of any structured theater performance.

accounts for otherwise unexplained commonalities in plot structure, and allows time for them to grow into differentiated forms with separate influences.

Sourvinou-Inwood asserts the plays as something more than just theater performance, calling it a “ritual occasion” (50). Her position rests largely on the idea of the plays taking shape around the procession through Athens of a statue of Dionysos.¹⁶ With this construction—both genres forming in relation to the representation of Dionysos—she builds to the conclusion that “tragedy and comedy had been generated in the context of the City Dionysia” (120).¹⁷ These two different genres, with supposedly different roots and widely different cultural roles, formed in the same place.

To chart the course from these earliest phases to the structured plays of Old Comedy, Sourvinou-Inwood attempts a theory of comedy’s origin. In her second chapter, “[Re]constructing the Beginnings,” she gives us a section titled, “Kômos and Comedy.” It is not a definitive explanation of the origin, but it attempts to identify the conditions that fostered comedy’s development. On her theory, the kômos in the City Dionysia coincided with a phase of ritual dining before the statue arrived, i.e., before the god had established his presence (172). Such a phase before the symbolic foundation of a cult would have been one of abnormality. She summarizes, “If we imagine a mixture of...exchanges involving obscenity and jeering, interspersed with animal or other choruses of men, this would give us a schema which would not be radically different from...Old Comedy” (173). This certainly accounts for those characteristics of comedy that distinguish it from tragedy, completing the picture when combined with the birth of the stage noted above.

16. Whom Cornford saw as associated with the earliest plays.

17. She discounts an origin at the Lenaia thoroughly, relying on records of dates of performance while discounting some prior theories (120-121).

Sourvinou-Inwood's argument to attribute all of this to a single festival is intricately structured, relying on interpretations of Greek sources supported by what she sees as likely patterns of behavior. Her points depend on a certain amount of supposition, and the Greek sources can be interpreted, admittedly, in different ways. Even if the broader conclusions are debatable, the relationship she posits between comedy and tragedy is sound enough for further consideration. Comedy and tragedy exist on a continuum of activity built around the reception and stewardship of the god as part of a religious festival. If we think of all of these elements operating together, comedy and tragedy presenting ritual sacrifice each in its own way in proximity to a real, large, public sacrifice, we can discard simple dichotomies, unseat certain comfortable distinctions, and open up to reading every play as if it had something to say about sacrifice.

Using similar evidence, Bierl's *Ritual and Performativity* seeks a balanced explanation for the role of ritual in comedy. While acknowledging "[t]he plot structures of Old Comedy are...to a considerable extent constructed on the foundation of ritual models," he avoids making claims to a primal origin (268). He makes the necessary point that the phallic influences recognized by Aristotle and relied upon by so many since are described in sources that come after Aristophanes (270). For Bierl, this makes the notion of such phallic processions as the main precursors to comedy highly unlikely. Instead of looking for an origin, we must realize their coexistence as parallel modes of performed ritual.

There are, though, certain key attributes of comedy that will inform our readings of the plays. Drama was unquestionably performed in honor of Dionysos, making it a religious occasion. Portrayals on stage of sacrifice and of the gods would take place under the gaze of the god of theater. Secondly, the theater performance—especially comedy—draws the

audience into the ritual action. The spectator becomes part of the performance by absorbing it and reacting to it (5). The chorus draws the audience in further. They embody ritual in song and dance. They span two worlds, alternately engaging with the fictional world of the play and addressing the audience as contemporaries (6). Everyone in the space of the theater becomes a part of a ritual performance, occupying a middle space between the larger ritual setting of the festival and the small presentations of ritual on stage in cases where comedy presents sacrifice. Any such cases should be read with this multi-layered ritual context in mind.

Thinking about the setting around the plays also involves thinking about the audience, as fraught as reconstructing a Greek audience may be. The plays, as Bierl points out, entail a certain amount of exchange between performance and viewer, and if we take the text in strict isolation we miss part of the conversation. The festival would have featured three tragedies follow by a satyr play from each of the competing tragedians along with individual comic plays, and given this format the audience watching comedy inside the theater would have been conscious of the tragedies taking place in the same venue and of the very real animal sacrifices happening around the plays. When a comedy presented a sacrifice, it did so in the shadow of the serious undertones of the real thing. In the physical and chronological senses, comedy is closer to actual animal sacrifice than we realize when we read the plays in isolation. Without taking on the impossible task of delving into the psyche of the Greek audience member, we can reasonably expect the fictional sacrifice to call to mind some sense of the real one—which would have had a strong pull on sight, sound, smell, and even taste—in the viewer's mind. Put another way, around a comic performance, sacrifice was always in the air.

With the ground-level characteristics of profanity, animal choruses, and exchanges with the audience, and the stage-level aspects of a structured dramatic plot all accounted for, this is a serviceable platform from which to assess the roots of comedy. All three present a structured stage drama that incorporates aspects of less formal yet socially salient ground-level performance. To align our three most recent sources thus far, the comedy of classical Athens comes from the phallic songs (according to Aristotle), and it takes from them not just the humorous sexual references but also an essence of religiously significant fertility rites (according to Cornford), and along with these religious ties it takes on a self-reflective aspect with a contemporary voice (according to Sourvinou-Inwood). Comedy is able to present the sacred act of ritual sacrifice alongside commentary on the here-and-now of the audience with the self-awareness to refer to the action as it is happening.

Now that we have looked at a progression of ideas around comedy, each building on the previous and delving a bit deeper than the last into the generative forces behind the genre, we can form a reasonable working definition to assist with the readings. Even if comic behavior is successful because of simple mechanisms that evoke primitive laughter, as it took form throughout the evolution of Greek culture it became a venue for confronting religious and social factors in ways that the other forms of presentation could not. Out of Old Comedy's multilayered formation sprang some unique characteristics, amounting to something rather complex for a genre whose formative history was initially not worth recording. By reacting to the other genre with which it shares the stage, comedy is self-conscious. It is aware of its own identity and purpose. It is free to express that awareness with a degree of transparency not afforded to tragedy. Comedy openly acknowledges its contemporary surroundings and raises audience awareness of tragedy, festival, and the

connected animal sacrifice. It conveys a sense of the poet as a human member of society who is making a deliberate appeal to the audience's contemporary sensibilities. Comedy serves the useful social role of identifying, acknowledging and regulating how drama appears to the audience and what it asks of them. We see this illustrated most blatantly in *Frogs*, when Dionysos weighs in on the merits of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

What does it mean for comedy to present its founding figure in this way? The action of the play underscores the idea that drama is a presentation for Dionysos, but it also acknowledges a measurable benefit that playwrights bring to humanity. As with the sacrifice itself, we have to wonder if the production would be worth it, regardless of what fulfillment it gave the gods, if not for some human benefit. To fully understand why the Greeks were concerned with such mutual benefit for gods and mortals we will need to look deeper into Greek religion.

Chapter III

Understanding and Communicating the Sacred

While there is evidence of practiced religion in their temples, in their stories, and in public records, there is no unifying document. There is no set code to say what their beliefs were. The practical evidence points to variations among city-states with a fluid process of assimilation and obsolescence. To know Greek religion, it is necessary to take those prevailing topics and combine them with a set of principles from comparative religion. This will supply the ways that they enacted their beliefs and the motivations behind them. It will also convey some of the grave importance behind an act such as animal sacrifice that may be lost for today's readers. We have seen authoritative sources on classical Greece use this approach before, and we will look at those studies to help us assimilate outside theories with Greek religion. In this regard we will look to Walter Burkert as the author of a longstanding predominant view on Greek religion and sacrifice. We will follow Burkert with a different take from Robert Parker, a perspective adapted to more recent changes in the critical landscape. With this comprehensive picture of core human motivations for religion tied specifically to the Greeks, we will be ready to assess scenes depicting religious acts within the plays. The goal of this approach is to understand both the theological aspects of religion as well as the human dimensions of religious experience, or put another way, how universal ideas are enacted and interpreted through human activity. Knowing the process behind this, we can better understand the end result we see in the plays.

Theoretical Approaches to the Sacred

To understand the applicability of religious theory to the plays at hand, it will be necessary to elaborate on some basic concepts as revealed to us by a few foundational scholars. Let us begin with the core of religious feeling. Rudolph Otto, in “On Numinous Experience as *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*,” coins a phrase for “the deepest and most fundamental element” of a sense of a power greater than the self, calling it “*mysterium tremendum*” (78-79). With an air of the unknown and the overwhelming, it is an experience that leaves the witness feeling insignificant by comparison. Approaching a divine likeness, opening a channel of communication with the gods, or participating in a vast crowd at a structured event may create this effect. Otto further defines it as “that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, . . . filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment” (83). The physical context—different sights, sounds, and scents—as well as content—unusual choices or formulations of words, grand themes—pull the witness out of an ordinary state of mind.

It seems on some level the experience of the play shares something with religious experience, whether the subject matter explicitly covers religious ground or not. Encounters with the *mysterium tremendum* pose a unique challenge to thought, as Otto says, “the daunting and the fascinating . . . combine in a strange harmony of contrasts” (85). The witness is simultaneously repelled and drawn. This aligns nicely with the contrast of the grotesque masks that comic characters wear and the welcome laughter their words inspire. Think also of the revulsion that some might feel at seeing the sacrificial animal’s throat cut competing with the desire to see the carefully ordered sacrifice play out—a source of tension that plays may borrow from the religious ritual, with unlimited potential for variation to heighten or

downplay the effect. Think too of the built-in paradox of the sacrifice itself in the division of the spoils between gods and mortals—a glaring point acknowledged frequently in the plays. These competing urges create an effect that allows Otto to do the work of tying his theory back to the Greeks for us, when he sums it up as “dizzy intoxication; it is the Dionysiac-element” (85). We already have Dionysos as the founder of the theater and now on Otto’s theory as the power behind feelings of religious awe.

In its power, the *mysterium tremendum* calls the attention of the witness away from ordinary concerns. All of the things that fade away during a moment of religious experience, i.e., the non-religious elements of life, Otto labels as “profane” (79). In our discussions of religious behavior we must remember “profane” as meaning everything non-religious, rather than the generalized sense of something vulgar or inappropriate. So when a phallic procession finds creative ways to describe the sex organs, what might seem to call for the label of “comic profanity” is more accurately apprehended as comic language with a specific religious purpose (fertility magic, on Cornford’s theory). Whether it is a procession anticipating the arrival of Dionysos or a sacrifice scene in a play taking place in the midst of a religious festival, the comic behavior embodied in Aristophanes’ work is not simply profane. Not every scene will have religious significance, but a well-rounded reading will consider the possibility.

Looking further into Otto’s definition, let us consider the phrase “beyond the sphere of the usual.” Comic plays, particularly those discussed in this study, begin with an effort to remove the setting from ordinary life. *Frogs* takes us to Hades, *Peace* takes us to Olympus on the wings of a dung beetle, and *Birds* seeks a new space between the known and unknown. If not outright religious events on their own, the plays at least seem intent on creating the same

effect. We see a deliberate interest in presenting the audience with locations that leave the normal world far behind. The festivals that hosted the plays were already a step removed from ordinary life, and the further distancing in the plays would have added to the effect.¹⁸ Taken out of the framework imposed by daily life, viewers would have been liberated to think about the ideas presented on-stage—political or religious—in new ways, without the usual associations required by the normal world.

Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return* provides the next step in the progression, as it brings Otto's broad-brush theory a bit closer to human activity. Eliade addresses sacrifice and elucidates the concept of the sacred as an answer to the profane. On his theory, human cultures attempt to make meaning by ordering their physical space and their actions within it on the model of a hallowed predecessor. Of human actions, Eliade says, "Their meaning, their value, are not connected with their crude physical datum but with their property of reproducing a primordial act, of repeating a mythical example" (4). In order to maximize the chances of encountering Otto's *mysterium tremendum*, people attempt to get as close as possible to the gods by performing their best approximation of what the gods did.

Through this process the places and items involved in the human performance take on special meaning, become sacred. In this way ritualized sacrifice grows out of the necessary act of killing an animal for food. Eliade explains, "The crude product of nature, the object fashioned by the industry of man, acquire their reality, their identity, only to the extent of their participation in a transcendent reality" (5). The victim and the knife become more than mere objects of human activity when they are treated according to the mythic prescription. For readers of comedy this opens a question of what happens when the characters do not

18. Sourvinou-Inwood speaks of the distancing effect of using the heroic past in tragedy, seeing it as a mode of religious exploration (46). The same effect can take place with the fantastic distancing that comedy employs.

follow the steps of ritual sacrifice. How many missteps before the objects of the sacrifice fail to rise to the level of the sacred? Outside of the play, this may create dramatic tension for the audience. Within the play, it may deprive the characters of the anticipated benefits of sacrifice. The consequences, or lack thereof, reveal the play's position on how much sacrifice actually means.

Along that line and more to our purposes, let us look specifically at what sacrifice means under Eliade. As suggested, each performance of the ritual commemorates a mythic place and time, creating a relationship to an ideal predecessor and giving the chosen site religious significance, which Eliade terms as "reality." He says, "[T]he 'reality' of the site is secured through the consecration of the ground, i.e., through its transformation into a center; then the validity of the act of construction is confirmed by repetition of the divine sacrifice" (20). Notice the use of the word "construction;" this suggests sacrifice as a generative act. When a group performs sacrifice, especially in a new place or during a time of uncertainty, they are imposing order on disorder. The shift to order from disorder mimics the original act of creation, as Eliade reminds us the earliest gods "organized chaos by giving it forms and norms," and that any subsequent settling by humans represents "the transformation of chaos into cosmos by the divine act of Creation" (10). While sacrifice takes a life and dismembers the victim, its intended effects are seen to give more than they take away.

To dissect the above statement a bit more, consider the phrase "repetition of the divine sacrifice" (emphasis added). The implication here is that the act gains power through the re-performance of prescribed steps hearkening back to the deeply valued original form. With this perspective readers of Greek plays should be primed to notice instances where the sacrifice goes off-script, so to speak, that is, the repetition is inexact. This is often the case in

Attic comedy; intruders interrupt the proceedings, the objects at-hand may not be the proper implements, or the protagonist may be committed to changing the formula. Such disruptions may happen inadvertently, as something beyond the performer's control goes wrong. We may reasonably expect the good will and blessings of the gods not to follow. This may also happen deliberately, a sacrifice breaking tradition as an act of defiance. Such a break makes a statement in two directions: the old way is no longer worthy, and a new standard is begun, establishing a new center.

It becomes necessary here to clarify idea of the "center." On Eliade's theory the initial sacrifice marks a place where heaven, earth, and the underworld connect.¹⁹ He remains heavily focused on the idea of an axis mundi as a point of origin for sacrifice, but for our purposes pinpointing the original center or mythical first performance is not necessary. What matters is not so much that these align to the same single instance but that they are the same as each other over time. Each sacrifice is built on the last, which is the best approximation of its predecessor, extending immeasurably back in time. Whether or not a performer makes a good-faith effort to reproduce the prior traditional sacrifice is a good indicator of where the character stands in relation to his or her society. The assurance in knowing that a sacrifice is the same as the last is part of what gives it religious power, as it ensures social stability. Allowing or willing the sacrifice to be altered threatens to send the society into dangerous, unknown territory. The sacrifice itself becomes a tool in the character's hands to either support or subvert the social status quo. In subsequent pages when we look at scenes from the plays, we will consider how characters attempt to use sacrifice along these lines.

19. Think of how comic plots seem to access this kind of space. *Frogs* brings us to Hades, *Peace* to Mount Olympus, and *Birds* to a place in between, not quite up and not quite down.

Along with the importance of sacrifice, Eliade's theory extends to another significant aspect of comedy: the marriage.²⁰ He posits a sacred origin, saying, "In Greece, marriage rites imitated the example of Zeus secretly uniting himself with Hera" (24).²¹ Again we see the importance of mimesis. As with sacrifice, human marriage comes to be a ritual ceremony based on a divine model. This rings true for more than just one specific mythological example, as Eliade explains "human marriage reproduces the hierogamy, more especially the union of heaven and earth" (23). More than Zeus and Hera, it is about Ouranos and Gaia. As with the axis mundi, it is a way of connecting the world above to the human world. It is not specifically marriage that may have this effect, Eliade tells us, but in general "any other ceremony whose end is the restoration of integral wholeness" (25). Recall Aristotle's point that comedy is about bringing enemies together, as the standard plot features two sides in a fractured society first arguing and then uniting as a result of the protagonist's scheme. Here we see yet another way that comedy is built on the same framework as religion itself.

To take such rituals from divine ideals to practical relevance, we turn to Peter L. Berger. In *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger explores what he describes as "the relationship between human religion and human world-building" (3). Under this theory religion plays an essential role in defining and upholding a culture's social order. As for the behaviors associated with religion, Berger asserts that ritual "'makes present' to those who participate in it the fundamental reality-definitions and their appropriate legitimations" (40). Ritual, then, reminds a culture of its identity, and the performance and observance of these acts become fundamental rites of social membership.

20. Recall how Cornford identified the concluding marriage as an essential part of the plot.

21. As his source, Eliade cites Pausanias, II, 36, 2.

For the cultural products that enforce the social order Berger uses the Greek term *nomoi*,²² which may be taken here as “customs” but also has the interesting possibility of suggesting the force of law (Liddell). Challenges to established rituals may throw the known world into question, threatening to unravel the trusted rules and lead citizens toward a state of terrifying disorder, or anomy.²³ Berger phrases it no less dramatically, saying, “The world begins to shake in the very instant that its sustaining conversation begins to falter” (22). A traditional ritual such as animal sacrifice functions to reestablish *nomos* and ward off the specter of anomy.

With this *nomos/anomy* dichotomy in mind, consider that Aristophanes’ plays often start in the midst of a phase of dissolution, as the protagonist laments the state of the world and sets about hatching a scheme to change it. In this way comedy taps into an underlying truth as voiced by Berger, that “[a]ll socially constructed worlds are inherently precarious. Supported by human activity, they are constantly threatened by the human facts of self-interest and stupidity” (29). Old Comedy seems to thrive on this ongoing threat. With the genre’s established tendency to address the contemporary concerns of its original audience, it is easy to imagine its plots as creative extensions of genuine fears, for instance, about how interminable years of war may cripple Athens. Initially, the protagonist’s scheme may worsen the condition, as the early phases of the plan further divide the people.²⁴ As the action proceeds, the plays often incorporate a familiar ritual as an attempt to either reunite the group or establish a new, more stable society. This ritual may be an animal sacrifice, and very often

22. For the collective whole of these, he uses the singular *nomos*.

23. This, of course, bears echoes of the progression from chaos to cosmos in Eliade.

24. And, for practical purposes, giving cause for the *agon* phase of the plot.

the closing exodos includes a marriage.²⁵ In the end, these two rituals acknowledged for their procreative and unifying powers, respectively, allow most of the characters to dance off happily. They have reestablished order and restored wholeness.

In this way the plays demonstrate an idea incorporated by Berger's theory, that legitimating rituals work to overcome challenges to the social order (31). A sacrifice, ordered on a tradition based in a past time when things were more stable than they are now, works to put fears of an unstable society at ease. The power of ritual to do this points to one of Berger's key tenets: *nomos* as "a shield against terror" (22). To go with this very physical metaphor, *nomos*, for all of its claims to divine heritage, is something that people make. It comes to exist through what Berger establishes as a dialectic relationship between humans and the world they inhabit. Consider his formal definition of *nomos*: "A meaningful order...imposed upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals. To say that society is a world-building enterprise is to say that it is ordering, or *nomizing*, activity" (19). He explains that humans form and grasp this order through a three-part process: 1) externalization of human product into the world; 2) objectivation, when humans see the externalized products as objects with a reality and identity of their own; and 3) internalization, the attempt to intellectually assimilate external objects, which inevitably gives them characteristics that were not there when they were initially externalized (4). In short, we create, we see our creations as other, we redefine those creations in an attempt to understand their otherness. The social order and all of its components result from this process, including religion, characterized as "the farthest reach of man's self-externalization" (27).

25. Recall Cornford's identification of marriage as a fixed plot point.

When this process works, the social order becomes so ingrained that it seems akin to natural order, and there we find the justification for a divine predecessor. Human actions, rightly or wrongly, can be attributed value beyond the sum of their parts. Of religions such as that of classical Greece, Berger says that “nomos appears as a microcosmic reflection, the world of men as expressing meanings inherent in the universe” (24-25). Religion assumes the role of channeling and interpreting this higher meaning, and its conduit is the sacred. Berger continues, “The sacred is apprehended as ‘sticking out’ from the normal routines of everyday life, as something extraordinary and potentially dangerous, though its dangers can be domesticated and its potency harnessed to the needs of everyday life” (26). This is a rather broad definition, and that works for our purposes. If human products that break from the ordinary stand to reveal higher meaning, then comedy can do sacred work, without being religious, or even from an anti-religious position. Berger broadens this potential further, saying, “The routines of everyday life are profane unless...proven otherwise, in which...case they are conceived of as being infused in one way or another with sacred power” (26). A character may set out and perform no established ritual, but if the result of the action is an audience with the gods or a transformational new social pact, these actions may do the work of the sacred and (within the fictional world of the play) provide the basis for future ritual.

As noted above, the comic plot typically begins with the protagonist dissatisfied with the current state of society. There is from the outset a sense that the old ways—the old politics, the old rituals—are no longer working. The protagonist is driven to begin anew rather than to uphold the old. Reaching back to Eliade, the best way to establish credibility and durability is through a founding ritual. Berger gives us the primary question for the founder of a new order, “How can the future continuation of the institutional order, now

established ex nihilo, be best ensured?” (33). The answer is to refer to a higher cosmic order, or in Berger’s words, “Let the people forget that this order was established by men. . . In sum: set up religious legitimations” (33). With this in mind, we must watch for comic characters’ attempts to rely on ritual as it suits their purposes.

There is one additional aspect of Berger’s theory with particular relevance to comedy. Part of the ongoing process of world creation involves defining identities to take part in that world. Berger explains the creation of persons as well as things, “[S]ociety not only contains an objectively available assemblage of institutions and roles, but a repertoire of identities endowed with the same status of objective reality” (14). Greek comedy puts this “repertoire of identities” on parade. Intruder scenes feature a succession of character types (comically exaggerated, of course) whose value in society is quickly measured by the protagonist, often in terms of whether or not they are worthy to share in the sacrificial feast.

By using the fictional world on stage to dismiss figures recognizable as part of the real world of Athens, Aristophanes’ plays challenge the current social order. If identities are socially constructed, how they are seen by society matters. This is true under the auspice of Berger’s theory that considers identity a matter of public perception: “Subjective identity and subjective reality are produced in the same dialectic. . . between the individual and those significant others who are in charge of his socialization. . . [T]he individual becomes that which he is addressed as by others” (16). In the case of intruder scenes where walk-on characters offer their services and are met with witty appraisals by the protagonist we may venture a new phrase: a dialogic process rather than a dialectic process. The verbal exchange on stage sets out to influence social order. This may apply to a general type, such as a weapons-maker, or a specific figure, such as the general Lamachos in the *Acharnians*,

whose services are of no good use. By saying who stays or goes based on their worth to society, comedy plays a role in the ongoing social construction of the world.

To form a necessary connection between ritual and stage drama we turn to Victor Turner. In the essay, “Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?” Turner provides reason to ground Attic comedy in a rich and useful tradition of “social drama,” in which meaning is established by “marrying...problems of the living present to a rich ethnic past” (9). Attic Comedy’s contemporary asides juxtaposed with the venerable act of sacrifice take on added dimensions with this in mind. Turner seems to invoke Attic Comedy directly when he specifies, “Theatre is one of the many inheritors of that great and multifaceted system of preindustrial ritual which...interdigitates clowns and their foolery with gods and their solemnity” (12). Turner’s perspective on theater opens up avenues for consideration of both the performance inherent in ritual and the self-conscious performance of ritual in stage drama.

To Turner, what happens on stage is not a break from the real world but a distinct manifestation of it. Society, as an inherently unstable product, perpetually fluctuates between coming together and falling apart. This process is what Turner calls “social drama,” which allows groups to “take stock of their own current situation: the nature and strength of their social ties, the power of their symbols, the effectiveness of their legal and moral controls, the sacredness and soundness of their religious traditions” (9). As a group recognizes its own destabilizing behaviors, it represents them in theater. The stage drama, witnessed at a safe distance and from a different perspective, influences public opinion to the extent that it motivates society to address its ills. If the behaviors can be repaired, society stabilizes. If not, it further divides.

Drama, then, is key to the survival of the social order. In the Greek context, tragedy reminds the audience of the sacred past, while comedy is free to more transparently represent the social ties, legal controls, and religious traditions mentioned above. Seeing comedy as a manifestation of real social events allows us to put more weight behind something like a character dismissal, seeing it as an integral part of a process through which society is constantly evaluating and balancing itself. This process of channeling social drama suggested by Turner involves “a characteristic developmental relationship from ritual to theatre” (8). This further strengthens the case to be made for comedy to address sacrifice in a meaningful way. Theater naturally develops from social events and has a distinct role to play in shaping them.

Addressing theater directly, Turner says, “both ritual and theatre crucially involve liminal events and processes and have an important aspect of social metacommentary” (8). The capacity for social metacommentary has been expressed immediately above. Equally important is the liminal aspect he mentions. Ritual sends viewers into liminal space for an actively participating audience, while drama finds a way to portray liminal space for a passively participating audience. When Turner describes “a stage...for unique structures of experience...in milieus detached from mundane life and characterized by the presence of ambiguous ideas, monstrous images, sacred symbols, ordeals, humiliations, esoteric and paradoxical instructions, the emergence of ‘symbolic types’ represented by maskers and clowns, gender reversals, anonymity, and many other phenomena...” he could plausibly be describing comedy, but this is how he defines liminal space (11). In the plays we will look for ways that the plots probe liminal space. We will also consider ways in which the theater makes a liminal space of its own. Turner describes the multitude of factors that theater uses

to pull viewers away from the normal world, describing “the intertwining of dance, body languages of many kinds, song, chant, architectural forms (temples, amphitheaters), incense, burnt offerings, ritualized feasting and drinking” (12). With such overlap, we can expect comedy to have some of the same effects. So what does liminal space do? It is an area in which the absence of normally prevalent ordinary forms allows new forms to take shape.

Religion in Greek Culture

Up to this point we have looked into the origins of comedy to expand its possibilities as a mode of religious discourse and at certain diachronic aspects of religion to clarify its relationship to comedy. This has been necessary to provide groundwork for a look at scholarship that deals specifically with ritual as manifested in Greek culture (i.e., the plays) and Greek religion. Some scholars take this as a de facto combination, but for our purposes of trying to establish meaning from the seemingly disparate entities of religion and irreverent comedy this is an important step. Prepared in this way, we can now safely infer when discussions of religion paired with more serious aspects of Greek culture extend to comedy as well. This will be especially useful as we draw conclusions from scholars focus on Greek ritual sacrifice. We will look next to Walter Burkert for his long-standing theory on the topic, followed by more recent work which tunes the debate to the more practical likelihoods of Greek life and behavior.

Burkert’s *Homo Necans* uses Greek sacrifice as a relatively well attested early form of ritual, employing it as a demonstrable link to a primal, bloody instinct that has been gradually suppressed over the course of human social development.²⁶ His conclusions have

26. While scholarly consensus on Burkert’s conclusions has changed, our study does not enter the argument about sociological implications, as they do not serve our present purpose.

been increasingly questioned over time, but if we can put sweeping statements about human nature aside we find some helpful revelations about sacrifice. Burkert's study considers a wide array of evidence, identifying the key elements as he builds his case.²⁷ While tracing these things back to point zero remains unnecessary, it does not negate the entire work. Let it suffice to say that there was enough of a relationship among ritual, religion and theater to convince Burkert and others to reach for ultimately unverifiable conclusions. That is to say, there is an undeniable matrix of influence among the three. They are interactive. The simple fact of this interaction is enough to encourage our efforts to explore the religious significance in portrayals of ritual sacrifice in comedy.

Burkert describes "two basic characteristics of ritual behavior...repetition and theatrical exaggeration" (23). The former echoes Eliade, and the latter echoes Turner. Burkert goes on to say that when "reinforced by constant repetition to avoid misunderstanding or misuse...the ritual creates and affirms social interaction" (23). This aligns with Berger. So in Burkert's set-up for a study particularly focused on the Greek treatment of ritual sacrifice he is quick to touch on three of the comparative religion theories covered above. As for the fourth, Burkert seems to hit most heavily on Otto's idea of the *mysterium tremendum*, saying that animal sacrifice best embodies the mingled feelings of terror and bliss captured by that phrase (40). Indeed, it seems an apt expression for the ineffable, subconscious killer instinct he is out to prove. The preference for these juxtaposed feelings, for this singular aspect of ritual may be what leads him to his now-questionable conclusion. He emphasizes this religious connection over the others, and this is understandable when a study privileges the literary evidence provided by tragedy and

27. It is important to note that he cites Peace very early in *Homo Necans* as a model portrayal of animal sacrifice (4).

undervalues the contributions of comedy, as has been the running assumption. De-emphasizing the distinct perspective of comedy makes for a skewed perspective, deprived of the fully developed light and dark, somber and celebratory range of sacrifice collectively presented to Greek society.

If we consider presentations of sacrifice in terms of these four elements of ritual—repetition, theatricality, social order, terrifying awe—we approach a more nuanced understanding. Each of the studies cited above contributes to the full shape. We can then measure any presentation of sacrifice by the extent to which it incorporates each element. Does it call attention to its predecessors? Does it focus on the performative aspect? Does it emphasize communal gathering? Does it play to a sense of awe? In deliberately reconstructed presentations of sacrifice, any one of these could be favored over the others to give a different impression. Each is a dial that the playwright could turn up or down to provide a completely unique *mélange* with different effects for the audience. Burkert might agree with this, as he conceives of ritual as a mode of communication in its own right, while recognizing that it is communicated by myth and drama (41). With so many options for uniquely stylized sacrifice scenes we can see the possibility of Athens using these presentations to communicate society's evolving attitudes about ritual to itself. If this is true, we should pay special attention to scenes that do not conform to the expected balance.

Bolstering the relevance to social order, Burkert points out that ritual requires social interaction (33); it depends on members coming together for the shared experience of a culturally unique product. He goes on to say that the sacrificial community, specifically, is a model of society as a whole, reinforcing the hierarchy (37). We can expect ritual to retain the power of a social experience even when dramatized. The communal aspect is heightened and

re-cast in interesting ways by the layers inherent in theatrical sacrifice. In comedy, we have a model sacrificial community on stage, composed of the protagonist, his closest allies, and deliberately selected individual intruders; we have society as a whole represented in the chorus and their differing opinions on a social issue; all of this presented on stage in front of the actual society; all taking place within a religious festival which is itself based on ritual. Ultimately we have a ritual community watching a ritual community. This is the important function of society presenting itself to itself, as observation allows insight not available through action.

Continuing on with Burkert's key features of ritual we find a simple statement worth exploring: "a rhythm develops from repetition" (24). This idea suggests a large-scale pattern forming over the course of multiple performances. With the weight of tradition depending on that repetition, breaks in the rhythm become all the more jarring. The consequences of disrupting—or worse, discontinuing—it would be severe. The tradition is challenged. The social order is shaken. In comedy such breaks would be expected, and we should ask what purpose that would serve. When we consider the liberties taken with sacrifice, comedy seems intent on throwing the rhythm off. What does rhythm do? It lulls us, confirms our expectations. Waiting for the rhythm to break creates a tension of its own. The surprise when it happens would have the immediate effect of generating laughter, but when the rhythm is stopped and started, the whole tradition is thrown askew. The break in what had been a satisfyingly familiar sequence snaps the viewer to attention. A trusted progression, once a united whole, falls into its component parts.

Robert Parker, in *On Greek Religion*, attributes to the Greeks a much more practical sense of their own ritual behavior. Regarding the role of sustaining a cosmic order, he says,

“the cosmic approach may over-mythologize” the common points we now see when looking at their rituals collectively (212). A broken rhythm then would have been less earth shattering and more a tolerable reversion to the profane, ordinary world. Parker recognizes sacrifice as a gift to the gods, as a feast and as a mode of communication, and he insists that the participants would have been aware of each of these as well. This is to say it was less a fearful encounter with death than a multifaceted experience spanning a range of needs. Parker considers the work of Eliade and others in the comparative religion camp, and he addresses Burkert and those classicists with whom Burkert was in conversation.²⁸ Reflecting a more recent outlook with the benefit of decades to process and react to this progression of earlier work, Parker’s effort tempers some of the previous tendency to unify and make grand the Greeks’ intentions. There is no barely suppressed bloodthirsty hunter, there is no towering, immaculate original form.

Parker emphasizes the localized nature of Greek ritual sacrifice. This view encourages an appropriately cautious approach to forming expectations about what it looked like and how it was used. As tempting as it is to attribute its causes and effects to a universal primal human urge, we must remember the fact of disparate and isolated populations that made up Greek culture. The ritual itself would have been a combination of constants and variables highly dependent on the occasion and local customs (225). As for what it achieved, this is a bit more consistent (both for the Greeks themselves and in line with previous studies). Parker explains, “Feasting in communication with the gods’ is certainly the description that would cover most cases, but the balance shifts between ‘feasting’ and ‘communication’ (151). We can say then that sacrifice operated on a continuum between

28. For this conversation among classicists, Parker begins with Karl Meuli as linking sacrifice to primitive hunting behavior. Jean-Pierre Vernant follows to focus less on the kill and more on the feast, which Parker sees as a more reasonable outlook. Burkert, of course, is less interested in the food and more in the kill (127-129).

satisfying human needs and interacting with the gods. In a sense we have here the lowest and the highest reaches of human experience. As we have seen, it is a little too simplistic to think of comedy as addressing bodily needs and tragedy addressing spiritual needs. Instead we should give fair consideration to how presentations of sacrifice explore that range in either genre.

Another way that Parker aids a reading of the plays is through analysis of common sacrificial terms. The often-used verb *thuein*, he points out, is “the closest multi-purpose verb in classical Greek for ‘to sacrifice’” (154). While used widely with animal sacrifice, it applied to barley sacrifice as well. That it comprises both grain and meat proves that the term is not a synonym for animal slaughter but simply indicates a food offering (135). More specifically, *thuein* denotes what is burned for the gods, the part that goes up in smoke; in its true sense it is far from the animal or corpse (136). A bit more in line with the kill favored by Burkert we find the term *sphagion*, regarding a “slaughter offering” with a purpose beyond feasting (154). The verb form *sphazein* is also used widely across sacrificial rituals. Then there is the more specialized *enagizein*. This takes the ritual the furthest from the human feast. The term applies to rituals wholly intended to gain the attention of the gods, when the goal is, as Parker says, “to give something over to [the sacred] and put it beyond the human sphere” (149). We might think of this as approaching the latter end of the feasting-communication continuum. A writer’s choice of any of these words may be a strong indicator of the purpose of a given ritual, but Parker reminds us that there were many terms circulating with the fluid nature of language and that we should avoid trying to retroactively impose order on them (154).

Finally for Parker—and this is key to the order of events in the ritual and to the structure of plays that present it—is the dynamic of tension operating within sacrifice.²⁹ For as much as he downplays the possibility of an innate appeal of the kill, the sacrifice very much depends on the build-up as the victim approaches its death. He uses the phrase “religious charge” for the mounting tension as the animal is led to the altar and subjected to whatever variation of steps might have ensued (135). As the victim is sprinkled with water or has a wisp of its hair thrown on the fire, as the aulos plays and incense fills the air, the anticipation rises ahead of the major turning point, when the animal goes from fauna to food. So whatever appeal the kill did or did not have, the ritual was effective at least in part because of properly ordered events focusing the audience’s attention and stoking religious feeling. Parker says that even small, private sacrifices would have worked this way (135). This should naturally lead us to think of sacrifices in comedy, in which one scene may deflate the tension utterly with a hastily prepared sacrifice while another might prolong it to an excruciating extent, leaving the fires burning as the characters are endlessly distracted.

Comedy clearly toys with a progression that is essential to the religious power of ritual sacrifice. We have seen a few studies that have suggested a sacrificial progression, but none sum it up as efficiently as F.T. van Straten in *Hiera Kala*. Van Straten founds his entire study of sacrifice on a three-part model: pre-kill, kill, and post-kill. Cornford gets close with his suggestion of a procession to the sacrifice, the sacrifice itself, and a procession from the sacrifice. Burkert iterated some form of it, too, but van Straten points out, “the relative importance that Burkert attaches to each of the three phases is not supported by the iconographical evidence” (9-10). Burkert held the kill as the moment most prevalent in the

29. Burkert also points out in *Homo Necans*, “Religion seeks to heighten tension through ritual” (21).

Greek mind, but the available evidence places the least emphasis on the moment of death and instead tends to focus on either the preparation or the aftermath.

Van Straten defines his phases based on the chronological progression of the act: pre-kill, “where the animal is still alive and whole;” kill, the moment of death; and post-kill, “all that was done with the animal’s carcass” (9). In this structure we can also recognize as the balance shifts from religious communication with the gods to human benefit. The chosen animal approaching the altar, nearing the moment of its death, would elevate tension (recall that Parker calls it a “religious charge”). The kill—whether there was fear, or awe, or cumulative aggression, or none of these things—would entail a moment of violence and gushing blood. The ensuing orderly preparation of the victim’s body would bring relief as the audience moved further from the peak of tension and closer to communal eating.

Aside from his helpful distillation of sacrifice, van Straten is also useful to the study at hand in supporting comic plays as legitimate sources on Greek culture, saying they “contain much that is relevant to cult and ritual” (7). He warns that we must of course remember that comedy was a source of entertainment more than a source of information and distinguish accordingly between “comic distortion” and “faithful reflection of the real ritual” (7). Ultimately, the kind of trust that allows us to draw real conclusions about Greek culture rests on the idea that award-winning comedy would need to be more than stereotypical jokes and dirty puns. It would relate to the real world for additional resonance and meaning (8-9).

Van Straten leans heavily on the plays, recognizing that the playwrights would not write in a spirit of pure invention but would draw on the practices of their own time to create the scene. Let us now turn to the plays to find out how, and why.

Chapter IV

Ritual and Sacrifice on Display in *Frogs*, *Peace*, and *Birds*

The use of religious elements in Attic comedy would have been expected, but there are instances when Aristophanes presents them with such emphasis as to demand our attention.

Ritual Passage in *Frogs*

In *Frogs*, Dionysos makes his way onto the stage with a muddled identity. He tediously leads a reluctant servant as any mortal character might, with a drudgery distinctly uncharacteristic of a god. He carries the props of Herakles, a club and lion skin. Underneath all of this he wears the slightly effeminate, distinctly non-Greek clothing that is his hallmark.³⁰ He is on a mission of divine aspiration but seems to be afflicted by mortal limitations, worried about death and discomfort. He reveals that he is to go to Hades to bring back a poet. Through his conversation with Herakles Dionysos talks as if he will have to die to get there, apparently lacking any divine ability to cross the boundary. Such concerns throughout the early stages of the play make him seem more mortal than god, afraid and uncertain.

Dionysos crosses the vast lake to get to the underworld and reunites with the servant Xanthias on the other side. The chorus makes its second entry, leaving behind their first

30. Herakles mocks him for his saffron-colored robe, *krokōtos*, and high boots, *kothornos* (45-48).

identity as frogs to appear as mystery initiates.³¹ They enter singing a song to Iakchos, an alternate identity of Dionysos.³² The god hides and proceeds to watch his own mystery play out. To step back from the action at this moment, here we have Dionysos on stage watching a ritual performed in his honor, within a venue thought to be overseen by the real god. The world on stage is a microcosmic version of the world of the theater. This inarguably irreverent depiction becomes more so with the recognition of Dionysos' statue in the theater. Not only is his likeness there, but the Greeks believed the gods to be present in their statues.³³ It is as if Dionysos himself were there over all of their shoulders watching this. Whether or not we believe with Sourvinou-Inwood's certainty that the statue was actually in the theater with the audience, this is indisputably Dionysos' realm.

Rather than any great blasphemy, this shows the extent to which comedy was free to touch on religious matters. If it could be so bold as to go after its patron god, it follows that other religious issues would be fair game. This was a space where they were free to see things in a different way without fear of consequence, and then afterwards return to them in the real world with either renewed respect and appreciation or a recalibrated sense of their actual role. In this case of Dionysos his value is reaffirmed by the end of the play. Athens should be thankful for his role as the god of drama, for in it he has the power to restore their strengths and make positive contributions to society.

To turn back to the narrative, as the chorus sing, their activity on stage is unclear to the reader, but Xanthias claims to smell cooking pork, which suggests a pig sacrifice. Of

31. Xanthias immediately makes their identity clear with "*hoi memuēmenoī*" (318). The understanding is that they are modeling here the Eleusinian Mysteries, of which Demeter was the main focus with Dionysos playing a secondary role as Iakchos.

32. According to Sommerstein, Iakchos had come to be equated with Dionysos by the time of the play (184).

33. Parker says in *On Greek Religion* that the Greeks referred to statues as the gods themselves (xi).

course the comic value of his statement is in the double entendre,³⁴ but in order for a second meaning to exist there must naturally be a first meaning based in some real action. The fact of initiates performing a ritual followed by the smell of cooking meat strongly implies a sacrifice. Van Straten, in *Hiera Kala*, notes that, “The poet would just hint at selected elements, and the audience, familiar with the ritual, would automatically fill in the rest” (122). The sacrifice would have been a matter of course for these initiates. It was recognized as such by the writer and the audience. What is more, these initiates, in the underworld and presumably dead, perform it as a matter of course—it is an unnoteworthy part of their proceedings. They do it with no consideration for the fact that they are in a place where the smoke, the offering portion, cannot rise. Dionysos acknowledges Xanthias’ comment and suggests that the slave may receive a portion of the pig, phrased as “sausage:” *chordēs labēis* (line 339). There is a sexual connotation here again, but the first meaning suggests that Dionysos might in some physical way receive this sacrifice. There is just enough of a suggestion to raise the question of whether or not he would. It is enough to invite a moment of pause, to wonder. This is, after all, taking place outside the mortal world. Are these dead initiates? Do the dead sacrifice? Does the sacrifice rise? Does it not need to rise because the recipient is right there with them?

These are not posed directly but are there nevertheless, and such unanswerable questions are endemic to the nature of comedy. Of course the Greek audience would not hold the action on stage to the standards of the real world. Comedy simply allowed these things by virtue of the fact that what happens on stage happens in a place neither here nor there, where the ordinary rules do not apply. It creates a state of uncertainty that carries the audience through the performance and contributes to everything that happens in the play. That

34. Again in that playful comic way, with the word for young pig and female genitals: *choiros* (line 338).

condition is uniquely magnified in this moment of *Frogs*. This otherwise familiar action is taking place outside the mortal world, in a place where the rules are unknown.

A brief note from a second Victor Turner essay clarifies this condition. In “Liminality and Communitas,” Turner says to be in a liminal state is to be “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (359). At this point in *Frogs* Dionysos is in the middle of defined places, stopped before he gets to his destination in the house of Hades. While watching the sacrifice, the god, who knows something of being both a victim and a recipient, is neither. In a dream-like way he is a passive observer of something ordinarily very familiar to him. Further, we see this ritual in a place not only detached from the normal rules but where the usual expectations for sacrifice—that the smoke would rise to please the gods—are made impossible. Seeing it isolated from its expected setting introduces the possibility of reevaluating it. Admittedly, this is not much of a sacrifice scene, but this is a magnified example of how comedy introduces the possibility of seeing ritual in a way that challenges expectations. With this point the play is providing a model example for how comic settings venture to some extent into liminal territory.

After encountering the initiates Dionysos makes it to the threshold of his destination. Here, still between places and still disguised as Herakles, the god trades identities in an almost fluid way with Xanthias.³⁵ He goes from demigod to slave. This illustrates an additional comment from Turner about the liminal phase, that it offers “lowliness and

35. Dionysos’ exchanges with Xanthias, in terms of wardrobe and words, further complicate his identity. Olson notes that the extent of their conversations and the fact that Dionysos refers to his slave by name “show just how thoroughly [Dionysos] has lost (or abandoned) what ought to be a free character’s natural dignity and superiority” (312). Dionysos has not only dropped to a human level but even further, demonstrating behavior below the level of a free citizen. This is beyond a god out of sorts or a god displaying human quirks; his identity is compromised repeatedly and in multiple ways.

sacredness” (360). Dionysos’ identity has been in flux between these two poles from the outset. His cowardice and uncertainty make him all too human before we are reminded of his divine status by the presence of his worshippers. This is exactly the confused state of liminality that allows for questioning of commonly understood roles.

Dionysos finds his true purpose as judge of the best tragedian to come back to the world of the living and save Athens. This is eminently appropriate to his role as the god of theater—his identity is restored. A fitting end in stark contrast to his earlier disreputable entrance. The mystery initiates, who perform sacrifice for him and sing in his honor, point him in the right direction, toward his destination. As he exits his transitional phase he gradually returns to being the god we know, his identity begins to re-solidify. When he interacts with Pluto and makes a decision with the fate of Athens in the balance it is hard to imagine the cowering figure we saw in the first half of the play. At the last he is sent off to wait for a feast provided by fellow god Pluto. To look at the whole arc of the plot, we see the god in this confused, uncharacteristic state, passing through a territory of transition and emerging at the end with a stable identity that conforms to expectations.

Of course the audience did not think of this as a true presentation of a god. The fact of a comic play and verbal cues within the play itself would help them to understand it as farce. Even so, this treatment demonstrates a great leeway with divine characters, freedom to pull them down to a human level—yes, for laughter, for comical incongruity, but also for a tacit acknowledgment that such things were worth occasional skepticism. Comedy provides a safe venue for Athens to explore, to probe around the edges of their values by exploring their normally fixed roles and rituals.

Ismene Lada-Richards explores all of the implications of Dionysos' provocative portrayal in *Frogs*. There is of course a natural comparison to another play that features Dionysos as a major character: *The Bacchae*. Lada-Richards explores this relationship, extending it beyond Dionysos to the running use of ritual in both plays. She concludes that Athens presents itself (by means of the play) to itself (in the festival) in "a liminal suspension between the profane and the sacred" (122). In *The Bacchae*, she says, the Dionysiac ritual fails as a rite of passage, and such a result is characteristic of tragedy's attempts at ritual overall. Her argument implies that in keeping with the social atmosphere of the festival the drama should, in the end, welcome the ritual initiate back into the polis to find a realignment with traditional social norms. On her argument, comedy categorically achieves this, tragedy does not.

This assumption is worth a challenge. Comedy does not venture away from and then restore order. Comedy proposes a new order in a direct, public challenge to the status quo. Within the rules of the festival, this would not be so disruptive as to incite unrest, but it would invoke a reconsideration of familiar forms. To draw her conclusion, Lada-Richards rests on the fact that the comic protagonist is surrounded by others. While it is true that the comic protagonist does not end up alone, as so many tragic protagonists do, we must recognize that tragedy works by ejecting the displaced individual from society, leaving society to go on unchanged and unchallenged, retaining the same set of rules that allowed for the protagonist's expulsion in the first place. Society as a whole holds course, is reaffirmed. This is exactly what sacrifice, as a religiously-motivated force as described above, is meant to do. In this sense ritual in tragedy is successful.³⁶ Comedy, on the other hand, adapts the society to the outlier. This is a much more radical proposition. By the end, the play conforms

36. Even if tragic sacrifice is perverted in its other aspects.

to the outlier's vision, proposing that the entire polis change its ways. In the plays that are the focus of this study, there is a ritual sacrifice on the way to achieving this radical end, but it is either not treated as a sacred duty or is not performed according to the rules. Within the unique conditions of comedy, non-traditional sacrifice leads to non-traditional, idealized society, rather than the restored order that Lada-Richards suggests.

Is comedy expressing contemporary feelings about sacrifice? Does this propose moving away from the old forms in order to move toward an improved society? We cannot know the audience felt this. If we accept that comedy mirrored the contemporary perspective of its audience, we can admit a more practical, less fearful social perception of sacrifice that expresses Athens' evolving attitudes about religious custom.³⁷

Ultimately, *Frogs* places ritual sacrifice in a suspended state, a place neither here nor there where its basic mechanisms can be questioned. While it is not described in detail, it has a certain weight, as it is performed by one of the most widely known ritual societies in close proximity to its intended god.³⁸ Though the sacrifice is subtle, *Frogs* demonstrates how comedy puts ritual outside of its usual setting, inviting questions and prompting a reconsideration of its fundamental aspects.

37. There is a real-world corollary for this that is at least provocative if not thoroughly convincing. F.E. Romer identifies currents of impiety moving through Athens in a late-fifth century pamphlet by Diagoras (Apopurgizontes Logoi) professing that "there is no direct connection between the world of the gods and that of humans" (in Romer's words) (357). While some such challenge to the popular religion is always likely, Romer finds in the work of Thucydides evidence of a wider shift. In 2.47.4, the historian writes of a trying plague, saying, "Supplications in the sacred places and prophecies and making use of such things were all ineffective, and the prevailing troubles put an end to these practices." Romer reads this as an indication that "communal belief broke down" in the face of this plague early in the Peloponnesian War (357). When we remember that Aristophanes' comedies were written as the war wore on and continued to challenge Athenians' faith in traditional practices, it does seem plausible that he would recognize and express such a change in belief.

38. It is at least possible that the obscured sacrifice is a nod to the secretive nature of the mystery cults.

Bargaining with Sacrifice in Peace

To further detail comedy's exploration of ritual sacrifice, we turn to *Peace*. While in *Frogs* we saw a protagonist passively watching from the outside, in *Peace* we see the opposite. The protagonist Trygaios is fully aware of how sacrifice works, and he uses it with timing and intent. He schemes to ascend to Olympus and demand the gods' attention for a struggling Athens. Finding that his city's fate has been left to War, Trygaios persuades Hermes to go against his own kind for the sake of humanity. The pivotal negotiating point is the promise of sacrifice.

With Hermes' help the mortals get what they want, and promptly conduct a celebratory sacrifice. What follows is a scene recognized for its seemingly true-to-life details.³⁹ Trygaios and his slave first catalogue their options, beginning with the most grand offering and working their way through the hierarchy of victims before settling on a sheep.⁴⁰ They progress the ritual with striking step-by-step clarity. After sending his slave for the sheep, Trygaios says, "I will furnish an altar (*bōmōn*) on which we will sacrifice (*thúsomen*)," using unambiguously sacrificial terms (line 937). "The basket is here," Trygaios says, "with the barley, garland and knife; and the fire, too" (947). As we saw in *Frogs*, such things did not always bear mentioning to an audience who would understand the component parts, but here Aristophanes chooses to provide such a clear inventory.

The word used for "basket" is of a particular sacrificial sort, the *kanoûn*. Van Straten stresses this basket as a fixed part of the pre-kill phase of the ritual, especially when paired with the *chérnips*, a water-bowl which also gets its mention in the play in short order (van

39. Cf. Cornford (231), Burkert (4), Parker (130), van Straten (31).

40. Van Straten calls on this example after offering tables to illustrate the monetary value of typical sacrificial animals (170 ff.).

Straten 32). After the slave returns with the sheep, Trygaios instructs the slave to take the kanoûn and the chérnips and “quickly go around the altar to the right” (line 955). Even though his action would have been visible, in keeping with the meticulous nature of the passage the slave redundantly verbalizes his progress, saying, “I have gone around,” before asking for the next command. Trygaios then dips a fire-brand in the cleansing waters of the chérnips and commands the sheep, “shake yourself” (960).⁴¹ We can infer that he has sprinkled the animal with water. He then scatters grains from the kanoûn and cleanses his hands with the chérnips, and after a quick comic bit for each Trygaios begins a prayer to their newly acquired goddess, Peace. Concluding the prayer, Trygaios commands the slave to “take the knife and slaughter the sheep in a manner fit for a cook” (1017-18).

Here Aristophanes uses a verb with heavy sacrificial connotations in *spházō*, and yet he qualifies it with an adverbial form of *mageirós*, which has to do with the job of a cook. The coexistence of these words in this line compromises the sense of sacrifice. Is it a sacred killing to found a new peaceful order and please the gods (i.e., Peace and Hermes, at this point in the play)? Or is it an embellished chance for a big meal? With *mageirikós*, perhaps Trygaios is leaning toward the latter. Sommerstein’s explanatory note says that when entertaining guests one might hire a *mageirós* “to bring a live animal...and perform its sacrifice” before cooking it for everyone (181). That, though, seems to befit a private occasion and to contradict the immediately preceding formal ritual performance in the presence of a divine figure.

41. This is a literal translation of the verb *seiō*, and it is a reasonable description of what an animal would naturally do when sprinkled with water. It is, however, cause for some debate. Sommerstein translates the word as “nod” to conform to the notion of the victim communicating its acceptance of its fate (Peace 179). Parker prefers the more literal translation as a key distinction in his attempts to dismantle the idea that the Greeks convinced themselves of a willing victim to ease their guilt over killing (130). Given the detailed nature of this sacrifice, Parker holds this verb to indicate the realistic expectations the Greeks had for their victims, free from any comforting self-deception. Our study does not intend to settle the discussion, only to highlight the extent to which comic sacrifice can be taken to indicate truths of Greek culture.

Encapsulated in Trygaios' words then we have a clash between sacred communication with the gods and a meal for human benefit, the two ends of Parker's continuum of sacrifice brought jarringly close together. This is the unique pleasure of Attic comedy as we know it through Aristophanes: a suggestion, usually unutterable, that our most sacred practices are really for human benefit. Comedy possesses the self-referentiality and here-and-now awareness, along with the safe distancing effect of the stage, to voice thoughts that might be of contemporary relevance to the polis but are not welcome in day-to-day life. One could always argue that this sort of built-in contrast was meant to be funny, but Trygaios is not a comic buffoon whose opinions are to be shunned. He is a comic hero, an ordinary farmer making an agreeable and resonant call for peacetime prosperity.

To return to the narrative, just before the kill the slave breaks the otherwise ideal progression altogether, saying, "Peace does not take pleasure in slaughter" (1018). They agree to finish it out of sight, indoors. There are practical reasons for treating a kill this way in a play, and Trygaios makes a self-conscious nod to the fact of sparing a real sheep for life after its turn on stage (1022). We should, however, consider the excuse. If Peace does not approve of the violence inherent in sacrifice, then who is it for? The old gods have left, so this performance is not for them. The mortal characters do make reference to it as an act of initiation, to establish Peace as their new ruling divinity, and they opt for animal sacrifice instead of a traditionally acceptable, bloodless offering of pots of vegetables (923).⁴² They perform the sacrifice for two reasons: because it is tradition, and because it leads to a feast. As a result of Trygaios' success, the need for awe-filled communication with the gods is gone. The sacrifice exists for human benefit.

42. Sommerstein confirms this use and identifies supporting passages in other plays (177).

After the indoor kill, they continue with a faithful repetition of the ritual. The slave prepares the *splágchna*, the internal parts of the animal for human consumption, as well as the *thulémata*, the meal-cakes offered along with the thigh bones to the gods (1040).⁴³ At this point they have successfully prepared, killed, and dismantled the animal, and they have gotten through it all before interruptions from unwelcome intruders. Only when the meat is cooking does the first intruder come. He is drawn by the scent, explicitly stated by the slave as “*tèn knîsan*”—the same word used for the savory aroma that goes to the gods (1050). The part of sacrifice that reaches the gods is the same part that draws unwanted visitors. With no gods left to win over, the *knîsa* becomes a nuisance.

The characters were conscious of the possibility of intruders from the beginning. Van Straten notes that they perform the entire ritual in a hurry, at the chorus’ urging to finish before an infamous aulos player could insert himself (32). Trygaios includes “*tachéōs*” (“quickly!”) in his instructions to the slave and the sheep, and the chorus say the same to Trygaios. The haste was certainly comical, but in a hurried sacrifice why commit to such a deliberate rendering of each step, both from the character’s perspective and the playwright’s? It would seem appropriate to comedy for Trygaios to cut corners, but instead we see every phase brought to completion. We might reasonably conclude that the depth of detail of the sacrifice meant something to the play, that the play is as much about the sacrifice as anything else.

Such a claim gains traction when we consider the positioning and length of the scene in addition to its thoroughness. The ritual is not an obscured matter of fact, a quick joke or a hastily attended detail in the closing *kômos*. It comes just after the midpoint of the play and

43. Van Straten cites Pherekrates, a contemporary of Aristophanes, saying that the thigh bones were dressed up with *thulémata* out of guilt over the meager offerings (141).

spans more than one hundred and thirty lines before it transitions into an intruder scene. Even then the cooking and serving of the food continue until the end. So we have a play really built around a detailed sacrifice, with its scent in the air for some four hundred lines. With this perspective some peripheral details begin to take on new significance.

Sacrifice is so strongly associated with the *knîsa* that notions of scent become linked to notions of sacrifice. With this in mind we notice how scent is kept in the air throughout the play. In contrast to the pleasing smell of the eventual sacrifice the play opens with two slaves elbows-deep in manure, complaining of the stench as they prepare the over-sized dung beetle. They draw the audience into this atmosphere by calling for help from the *koprológoi*, dung-collectors, in the crowd. The scene reveals itself to be more than just an excrement joke when they proceed to connect this foul smell to the gods. The second slave says, “This beetle is of such arrogance that it bears itself haughtily and deems it not worthy to eat unless I work it through the entire day” (lines 25-27). This notion presents a parallel to the abundance of preparation so deliberately displayed in the later ritual sacrifice—in like manner an animal is not worthy of the gods unless sufficiently readied. They strengthen this parallel by saying the “disgusting, foul-smelling, gluttonous” beetle must have come from Zeus (38).⁴⁴ Their conversation leaves the impression of overworked dung to dominate the first portion of the play, when they are still victims to the will of the traditional gods, just as the pleasant smell of sacrifice dominates the second half, when they inaugurate the rein of the new goddess Peace.

As Trygaios progresses toward his goal, the smells improve along with humanity’s prospects. He encounters Hermes and wins him over with the promise of sacrifice through

44. Aristophanes drives this connection home later in the play when the beetle is said to be connected to Zeus’ chariot (723).

additional cult following. The prospect of the *knîsa* is enough to convince the god to go against his own kind. With Hermes' consent, the mortals free Peace and her attendants. Trygaios compliments *Theōría* on the perfume-like aroma she puts forth. Her sweet breath is associated for him with the harvest, the Dionysia, tragedies by Sophocles and Euripides, wine and parties (525 ff.). These are hopeful visions, all of the pleasant things that will happen once they've established Peace in Athens through an inaugural sacrifice. Once they bring Peace down from Olympos, the scent of the actual sacrifice marks the beginning of that age when all of those good things are before them.

Over the course of the play, sacrifice has been used not as a sacred undertaking but as a means of manipulating the gods and as a chance at a feast and celebration. For a new, nontraditional deity in Peace, promising new life for Athens, animal sacrifice is inappropriate altogether. If theater is a place for society to present itself to itself and if comedy is a place to acknowledge the current feelings of the populace, we see here an acknowledgment that sacrifice has moved from a fearful offering to the gods to a form of leverage over the gods to achieve human ends.

As we transition to *Birds* it will be important to keep in mind a line from Peace. After Peace has been brought to Athens, the chorus leader says to Trygaios, "we will always hold you first, except for the gods" (917). Here the comic hero, on the verge of performing a celebratory sacrifice, is given the highest compliment a mortal can reasonably expect to receive, as being the best among mortals. We will compare this shortly to the honors earned by the successful comic hero of *Birds*.

Sacrifice Corrupted in Birds

Birds opens with the protagonist Peisetairos and his partner Euelpides leaving the polis behind and looking for a new place to settle in order to escape their debts. Unlike other comic heroes we have seen, Peisetairos is not on a good-will mission for the sake of humanity. His motivation is simple and selfish; he has no grand plan until opportunity presents itself. Upon finding the home of the man-turned-bird Tereus, Peisetairos recognizes a strategic advantage to the bird realm. He urges Tereus to formally establish a city, giving the birds rule over mortals and control over the sacrificial knîsa as it rises to the Olympian gods (lines 188-93).

We break from the play briefly to consider a study by F.E. Romer, “Atheism, Impiety and the Limos Mēlios in Aristophanes’ Birds.” Romer zeroes in on the phrase “limos Mēlios,” used in the play at line 186 as a reference to a recent Athenian military campaign that cut off and starved the population of the island of Melos. To support his notion of how significant this reference is, Romer relies on the heavy emphasis on sacrifice and on the human relations with the gods throughout the play. The comparison to the realities of a military campaign casts Peisetairos’ plan within the play in a harsh light. Romer phrases it as “a naked act of power and aggression” directed at the gods (352). What is more, this is not done out of petulance or resentment over a particular divine slight. This redirection of sacrifice is a rejection of the traditional model of communication between mortal and immortal. Romer clarifies it to be “an assault on the established gods by those who no longer credit the gods’ power,” through which, “[t]he gods will be deprived of the most concrete proof that humans revere them” (358). To extend the context in a small but helpful way, we set this alongside the deliberate use of sacrifice in our previously discussed play. In both Peace and Birds the

comic sacrifice is used pointedly to address the very tradition that fostered it.⁴⁵ There is, though, a major and jarring difference: in *Peace* mortals use sacrifice as a tool of persuasion, while in *Birds* they use it as a weapon.

To return to the play, Tereus agrees to Peisetairos' plan, but when he summons other birds they react with hostility to the presence of humans. This does not divert the plot for long, but the reaction of Peisetairos is worth noting. Threatened by the birds, he and Euelpides use the cooking implements they had in tow as a military-like defense.⁴⁶ A.M. Bowie, who gives considerable thought to *Birds* in *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy*, raises the question of what the cooking gear might have been (152). The text offers *chútra*, *obelískos*, and *ochúbaphon* (pot, skewer, saucer, respectively) with no explicitly sacrificial elements (lines 358-61), though Bowie suspects it may have been possible to identify them clearly on sight. Of course, with the idea of sacrifice expanded through van Straten's post-kill phase, including "all that was done with the animal's carcass" as noted above, any cooking item at all might have had sacrificial resonance, especially when sacrifice had been so recently mentioned in the play. Whatever the props may have been, Aristophanes presents us with weaponized cooking implements in this scene, suggestive of the way that sacrifice is soon to be weaponized against the gods.

45. A study like Romer's presupposes a certain application of ritual sacrifice in comedy that has driven this thesis but has not been articulated in previous studies. Namely, that comic sacrifice leverages strong ritual and tradition-based associations in urging Athens to consider its current state of affairs. The degree of detail in the ritual, and the ritual's tendency to bring the hero closer to his end goal suggest a more complex function than simple parody. Regardless of whether political readings of the plays are in fashion at the moment, if a reasonable case can be made that Aristophanes is addressing the social realities of his audience then we must also allow the possibility that he is expressing a sense of sacrifice held by some portion of the audience as well. To say as Romer does that details about the sacrifice (let alone sacrifice as a central metaphor) contribute to the social meaning of the play admits that Aristophanic sacrifice was purposeful. But nowhere does Romer account for the fact that comic sacrifice has not previously been credited with such ability. As with the likely references to the Melian starvation, comedy is not simply parodying a familiar act but is both responding to and informing the audience's perceptions of the ritual act. The play survives to reveal those things to us today.

46. Euelpides compliments Peisetairos' idea with the word "*stratēgikôs*" (362).

Peisetairos wins the hostile birds over by raising their ire, convincing them that sacrifice was once theirs. He says that the birds commonly depicted with Zeus, Athena, and Apollo used to be able to pluck the *splágchna* from the gods' hands (line 519). Peisetairos proceeds, apparently improvising a mythos, to tell the gathered birds that there was a time when they were honored before the gods and that they deserve to re-take their rightful place. The birds accept their human visitors on the merits of this story. Peisetairos and Euelpides are changed to birds and set about officially establishing a new city. As an act of foundation, they must perform a sacrifice (810).⁴⁷

Peisetairos seems intent on a proper sacrifice, as he mentions a priest and a procession and calls for the *kanoûn* and *chérnips* (849-50). The chorus support the ritual, talking of a processional hymn and a sheep offering. A priest begins under the command to sacrifice to new gods (862). He and Peisetairos go back and forth invoking various birds, until the priest gets carried away and Peisetairos dismisses him and assumes the lead himself (894). This is no longer an ordered sacrifice in the manner of that of Peace. Aristophanes embraces a comic trope by having a scrawny goat as the victim (901-02). Peisetairos continues with the ritual, but before he can make the kill the first intruder arrives, defusing the accumulating religious charge.⁴⁸

As the intruder, an artless poet, plies his trade, the moment of death is delayed for more than fifty lines. Peisetairos then makes a serious attempt to return to the ritual, even backtracking to ask his attendant to circle the altar a second time (957). Before they complete this step the second intruder arrives. As Peisetairos insults and attempts to dismiss the oracle-

47. Recall Eliade's emphasis above on sacrifice as a way of imposing order on strange territory.

48. To use Parker's phrase, cited above. This would like have a strong dramatic effect, as the audience would be left to anticipate when, or if, the sacrifice might be completed.

monger, the newcomer warns not to take matters of the gods lightly (963). There are layers of irony here as the oracle-monger seems disingenuous in his own right and is clearly seeking a handout, while of course this moment in the play is treating religious matters lightly.

From the oracle-monger on, the intruders enter immediately after one another. The sacrifice cannot progress. The fourth is a city inspector, and Peisetairos wonders aloud how such a bureaucrat was able to find the new city “before we have sacrificed to the gods” (1034). This statement underscores the reliance on sacrifice as a founding tradition, one that must be carried through to make any territory official, even one that hopes to overthrow the gods. This sense of entrenched human tradition seems independent of religious motivation at this point. It identifies sacrifice as a sort of act of civic license, uncoupled from its sacred meaning.

To escape the interruptions they move the sacrifice indoors.⁴⁹ From the start of the ritual to the moment Peisetairos comes out to confirm that the sacrifice went well, more than two hundred lines have passed. The first sacrifice to new gods was started, stopped, redoubled and relocated. It required two different officiants and is not likely to offer much of a feast. It would be hard to call this a successful ritual. In any form other than comedy this would not bode well for a fledgling city.

To make matters worse, bad news comes immediately after, as one of the Olympian gods has infiltrated their new territory. The goddess Iris has been sent to reassert the Olympians’ claim on sacrifice, but Peisetairos responds with a direct challenge. On Iris’ departure the chorus announce that they have blocked the gods and secured control of the “smoke of holy sacrifice” (1267). With this accomplishment, Peisetairos is crowned king among birds and humans. Mortals see his actions as heroic, and they begin to imitate bird

49. Also done in *Peace*. Here we have practical staging concerns, with two different creative motives.

behavior. To summarize, with his sacrifice complete the comic hero earned the ire of the gods and kingship among humanity. Peisetairos is now uniquely prepared to consort with Prometheus, a divine predecessor who also angered the gods for human benefit.

With Prometheus' entry, Birds recalls the mythical origin of sacrifice even as it subverts it. Romer reminds us of Prometheus' force on stage as a reminder "of the Greek paradigm for sacrifice which he had established" (361). The mythical progenitor of ritual sacrifice appears again to preside over this world-reordering change. The Titan announces that Zeus is finished and the gods are starving in the absence of sacrifice, specifically, so there can be no doubt, "*knísa mēríōn*," the smoke from the thigh bones (1517). Given his well-known opposition to the gods and his role in establishing sacrifice among humanity, Prometheus is eager to help Peisetairos. Prometheus sets the conditions for final victory: Zeus must relinquish power to the birds and give Basilea to Peisetairos. This latter condition will ensure that Peisetairos also gains possession of the thunderbolt.

Thus prepared, Peisetairos wins a negotiation with Poseidon, Herakles, and the Triballian god sent to carve out a settlement. This interaction provides a notably dark moment. As the gods arrive, Peisetairos is preoccupied with cooking, but this is not the post-kill of the sacrificed goat. We have a perversion of the expected cooking scene with birds on the spit. Peisetairos claims they rose against the bird democracy (1583). He then requests the cooking birds to be seasoned with the same ingredients he mentioned when describing how poorly humans treat birds earlier in the play (534). Considering how anthropomorphized the birds have been, and how flippant Peisetairos is about cooking them, it is a gruesome scene. It becomes more so when we remember that Peisetairos has become one of the birds—this is cannibalism.

James Redfield connects cannibalism to sacrifice in his article “Animal sacrifice in comedy: an alternative point of view.” He seems to be of a mind with Burkert when he says sacrifice produces anxiety. “In Greek mythology,” says Redfield, “this anxiety often produces images of cannibalism” (170). He expresses the root of this fear as a sense of “the self-consumption of society” (170). Sacrifice should be a protective act, ensuring ordered killing with a defined hierarchy of victims. Under Peisetairos’ rule and following his compromised ritual, this very new bird society is already consuming itself.

Peisetairos prevails over the weak-willed gods and soon after enters in glory with Basilea and the thunderbolt of Zeus. In this moment of victory he is not the typical comic hero seeking wide human benefit. Recall the celebration at the end of Peace, when it was said of Trygaios, “we will always hold you first, except for the gods” (line 917). For Peisetairos, the exaltation is, “he has gained power over all that Zeus possessed” (1753).⁵⁰ On a plot to control sacrifice and founded on a compromised sacrifice performed himself, Peisetairos becomes the new Zeus. Further, of the examples we have seen, the most corrupted, most selfishly motivated sacrifice results in the greatest individual triumph.

50. Here we rely on Sommerstein’s translation, as the original text has cause for debate (310-311).

Chapter V

Attic Comedy in Context

There are different degrees of achievement across the plays, but in any case, sacrifice is presented as a tool for human ends, mastered as mortals take their fate from the gods' hands into their own. Such conclusions can only ring true if we agree that for all of the fictional encoding, sacrifice in comedy was treated with some regard and in a way that was perceptibly honest to its audience. When we read comedy with an understanding of its complex influences (from ritual chorus to phallic song) and of the resonance of the religious events that it portrays, we can recognize the potential for it to reveal meaningful truth.

On this point we find support in the two-part premise on which Andreas Willi relies when analyzing comedy for revelations about the sociocultural attitudes of Athens: first, that "every ancient text... contains a set of conscious and subconscious sociocultural values and opinions," and second, that the fictional presentation of such "allows conclusions not only about the values and opinions of the author but also about those of the society in which he lived and for which he wrote" (112). It is reasonable then to draw conclusions about attitudes toward sacrifice from a fictional representation, even when exaggerated or distorted for comic effect. Aristophanes does not give us comic clichés, but offers us rituals and sacrifices distorted in such unique ways that they ask for our attention.

In Aristophanes' hands we see a religious act primarily applicable to tired notions of reaching out to the gods. While there remained a real-life social investment in sacrifice as a religious event, for the modern concerns of the polis its value lay in its use as leverage

against traditional powers. Its power to challenge the gods came from its religious aspect, but it also held practical value as an occasion to gather, and to demonstrate which social roles were welcome to share in the feast. There is room for both Burkert and Parker: it was an awe-inspiring moment and a cause for a meal, with the emphasis placed according to its purpose. This would mean that sacrifice was something creatively manipulated to achieve a goal, used in a deliberate, pointed way.

In each of the plays detailed above, we see sacrifice removed from its typical confines. Set free from the ritual atmosphere and cast in the light of comedy's irreverence, these scenes encourage us to reconsider how, when, where, and why sacrifice is used. The comic portrayal downplays the value of communicating with the gods and brings out the aspects of civic tradition and human benefit. Taking part in a ritual with these redistributed proportions brings the comic hero a degree of success greater than what he initially set out to achieve.

John Given recognizes something similar in "When Gods Don't Appear: Divine Absence and Human Agency in Aristophanes." Given points out that Trygaios' qualities as the hero of Peace "circumscribe the two forces usually most outside human control, the gods and chance" (117). This exemplifies a general sense in comedy that the gods are less of a factor in determining human fate. *Frogs* may initially seem to be an exception with Dionysos as the protagonist, but his mission is to retrieve a mortal to restore Athens. When the gods do get involved, they are benevolent or impotent rather than punitive. Given credits Peisetairos with "domination of the cosmos" in *Birds*, clearly modeled in his control over the three hapless gods who arrive to attempt a negotiation (124). Across the plays, mortals by their own inventiveness possess the power to create an idealized society. In a world where that is

the case, the value of traditional sacrifice is drastically diminished. An incomplete or disorderly sacrifice is no cause for concern because there is no threat of divine retribution. Comic characters retain sacrifice, but on their own terms and in celebration of its practical value.

To broaden the scope, we return to the idea of drama as a means for society to present itself to itself. As a whole, these plays expose comedy as displaying heroes responding to Athens' problems of the present, while repeatedly demonstrating a lack of concern for the gods and a commitment to embracing sacred institutions on human terms. As readers looking to understand classical Greece through limited remains, we must measure this against the available context, touching at times, as we have seen, on the literary, social, historical, and religious factors that contributed to Attic comedy. While no point of origin has been found, it is enough to establish this range of connections. Comedy bears the influence of all of these forces, which are not isolated manifestations but interactive elements of a complex culture.

The final piece will be to situate the plays in a space where drama, society, and religion come together, in the festival. When we recognize the role of the larger festival as a venue to present and re-consider the status quo, some of the claims that may initially seem too broad for a single comic play suddenly become more plausible. Whenever we read the plays in isolation, we must remind ourselves that their message was amplified when situated in this larger ritual context. A particularly helpful analogy for our understanding the Greek festival is Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival.

Bakhtin's carnival is a place where the social hierarchy is deliberately inverted, where subversive ideas are expected, a sanctioned period of social transgression. Bakhtin did directly associate carnival with Attic comedy, but only briefly. While not an exact fit in all

respects, the concept has provided a needed framework for classicists. Among a number of subsequent extensions of the idea, Simon Goldhill makes headway in applying its meaning to Aristophanes specifically, while Charles Platter elaborates on the persistence of ideas presented in the carnival atmosphere.

Goldhill warns against getting mired in questions of how seriously to take comic representations of Greek traditions. The festival framework creates a ritual space of its own, a unique setting in which both tragedy and comedy were expected to address sacred institutions for the benefit of the polis.⁵¹ The audience went in on the assumption that comedy would include social commentary, something considerably more substantial than empty gags. Within this environment comedy employed inversion and parody to challenge perceptions of institutions both past and present.

Goldhill emphasizes the genuine power of the carnival atmosphere. He cites Bakhtin's line, "[Carnival] was hostile to all that was immortalized and complete," focusing on the word "hostile" to cast carnival as less of a controlled tension-release disguised as play and more of a subversive force (170). So if sacrifice was perceived as a prescribed ritual fixed from some point in the mythic past, it would have been comedy's obligation to challenge this idea. The festival is not simply a temporary agreement among a populace to pretend the social order had been challenged, after which they would be satisfied to return to their allotted roles. It was more a tempting invitation to explore the possibilities of an upended status quo.⁵² Theatergoers at the Lenaea and City Dionysia would find occasion to

51. Goldhill begins with Bakhtin's work on carnival, and establishes a link from carnival to Aristophanic Old Comedy via Jean Carrière's *La Carnaval et la politique*, 176-183.

52. Goldhill outlines a long critical debate about how effective licensed inversion is, and it seems that the more nuanced considerations agree that the messages and impressions of carnival do carry over into ordinary life (179-180).

laugh at a comic hero's attempt to change an Athens gone wrong, but they might come away with a new awareness that something was wrong with Athens.

Charles Platter, in *Aristophanes and the Carnival of Genres*, supports the power of carnival, saying that certain elements “produce far more lasting effects than the officially controlled time and space of carnival itself” (2-3). In an idea that elevates the significance of the plays, Platter sees the carnival atmosphere's ability to influence as an issue of language, the “result of a (public) critical discourse that problematizes the official categories of everyday life” (8). Performances in this atmosphere take part in an ongoing dialogue among and between festival occasions. It is reasonable then to look at comedy for the ways it contributes to a long-term negotiation navigated by language rather than behavior. With this in mind, we can see comedy as presenting particular aspects of a ritual cast against different backdrops relevant to the state of Athens at the time. When we consider that the plays covered in this study continue to probe ritual sacrifice over a span of sixteen years (while Athens was mired in war), we see an ongoing process of reevaluation in response to changing conditions and perspectives.

When we stop seeing the plays as isolated instances and consider them as representative examples from a continuous timeline we can view them as snapshots of Greek attitudes toward their sacred practices, especially in the case of comedy, where playwrights were at greater liberty to transparently convey the contemporary moment. When comedy discusses the merits of tragedy, or the perceived futility of asking the gods for help, or a desire to escape the hopeless bureaucracy of Athens, how could comic sacrifice not be seen as a credible mode of social commentary? The genre reveals itself as an integral part of the multifaceted way that the culture expressed itself. The weight of the sacred, the underlying

power of the festival, and the inventive vision of comedy, such as we have seen, give these scenes meaning beyond the laughter.

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