

Exploring Your Multi-media *metis*

in the

Transformed *polis* of Aristophanes' *Birds* and *Ecclesiazusae*

Thursday 2:00-4:5 in Dodd 167

Ann Bergren

Office Hours: Tuesday 2-3 pm in Dodd 289E

The goal of this class is to cap your study of Classics with an exploration of creative transformation as a mode of imagining and interpreting ancient Greek texts. You will use your own *mêtis* to represent the manifestations of *mêtis* in two plays by Aristophanes that dramatize the transformation - the changing of the form, both the conceptual ideology and the material design - of the *polis* "city-state."

Your own *mêtis* comprises not only traditional forms of representation - such as writing, drawing, and dramatizing, but also new digital media - such as PowerPoint presentation, the digital editing of images, video, and sound, and digital media publishing. The class thus presents the chance to experiment with the cooperation between traditional methods of Classical study and new avenues opened up by the advent of digital technology and the coming to our department of a specialist in this emerging field, Professor Chris Johanson. The class devotes itself to the fact that the potential of a new synergy between traditional and digital modes of Classical study is itself a manifestation of *mêtis* in our current world.

What is *mêtis*? It is the working and the work of "transformative intelligence." This power is manifested in endless shifting from one shape or form to another - from divine to human, from male to female, from inanimate to animal, from solid to liquid, from fire to water. Creatures endowed with *mêtis* are masters of reversal - turning the hunter into the hunted, upending spatial divisions and the hierarchies they support, putting the underling on top. They apply this skill in material interweavings - whether of cloth, brick walls, or the interconnections that make a joint.

Although some males are endowed with *mêtis*, like Prometheus and *polumêtis* Odysseus, its chief exemplars are animals and women. Certain animals are masters of *mêtis*, such as the fox, who lures his hunter by playing dead, only to turn animate again, and the frog-fish, who turns his body inside out, making the interior an exterior, so that the hook falls out. But it is in the female above all that Greek thought locates this power of imitation and inversion. For *mêtis* is not only a common noun, but also a deathless female, the goddess Métis.

Upon seizing his sovereignty, Zeus' first act is to overpower Métis and make her his wife, swallowing the pregnant goddess and giving birth himself to her child, Athena, from his head. Thus now confined within the body of the "father of men and gods," Métis cannot give birth to a son who would supplant him and must now "devise both good and evil in his interest" alone. This account of their marriage and its role in Zeus' regime establishes a crucial claim: that the formation and exercise of

patriarchal political power depends not upon the elimination of *mêtis*, but upon its effective containment within the walls of the body politic.

In two plays by Aristophanes, the *Birds* and the *Ecclesiazusae*, we see two models of how the *polis* is transformed, when *mêtis* escapes containment by Olympian father-rule.

In the *Birds*, *mêtis* is embodied by animals - the birds - who transform the city by their capacity to transcend the power of gravity: with their wings, the birds can fly. Inverting, if not abolishing, the distinction between earth and sky, solid and void, to which the human city-form is subject, they build a *polis* in mid-air, extending over the whole of human political space, thereby blockading the passage between men and gods. Making use of the media of your *mêtis*, how do you imagine these birds? What are they wearing? How do they sound? What does their city look like? What specific elements in the text motivate your visions?

In the *Ecclesiazusae*, women disguise themselves as men in order to infiltrate the *ecclesia* "legislative assembly," where they will vote in a new political order, a communistic gynocracy, that is, a rule-of-women. They invert all father-ruled power structures in service of a *polis*-form that breaks down the walls of the private *oikos*"household" and re-programs public political spaces into banquet halls. Making use of the media of your *mêtis*, how do you envision these disguised women/men? What are they wearing? How do they sound? What does their city look like? What specific elements in the text motivate your visions?

In the final project of this class you will represent your answers such questions as these. The project will consist of both creative imagining and critical commentary on your creation: (1) choosing a scene from one of our plays and creating for it a multi-media rendition, and (2) writing a critical commentary on what you have created and why, supporting your choices by detailed references to the texts we have read in class. This final project will be graded on the breadth and detail with which you cite our readings in your account of what you did and why.

SYLLABUS

I. Introduction

seminar 1, September 24

Overview of the goals and methods of the course.

Visual evidence of Greek comedy to stimulate our imagining of the works of *mêtis*.

Formation of groups, assuming a class of maximum 15: 5 groups of 3 each.

seminar 2, October 1

Your multi-media *mêtis*.

Traditional: writing, drawing, dramatizing

Digital: demonstration by Professor Chris Johanson

PowerPoint: its various capabilities

Image editing software: Photoshop and/or its alternatives

Video editing software: the various non-costly alternatives

Sound editing software: any non-costly alternatives

Digital media publishing: blogs? can you put a .doc or a .pdf on a blog? can you capture and incorporate videos from YouTube?

II. What is *mêtis*? Animals, women, and political power.

seminar 3, October 8 [+] seminar 4, October 15

PRACTICE OUR PROCESS: PowerPoint presentations plus a *mêtis* invention by groups in response to assigned questions on readings:

"The Fox and the Octopus," pp. 27-54, "The Combats of Zeus," part 1: pp. 57-68, "The Union with Metis and the Sovereignty of the Sky," pp. 107-130, in M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*.

III. The workings of *mêtis* in the transformation of the *polis*.

seminar 5, October 22

PRACTICE OUR PROCESS: PowerPoint presentations plus a *mêtis* invention by groups in response to assigned questions on readings:

Aristophanes, *Birds*

Background: "Aristophanes' *Birds* and the Rise of Civilization," pp. 151-182, in K. Rothwell, *Nature, Culture, and the Origins of Greek Comedy. A Study of the Animal Choruses*.

seminar 6, October 29

PRACTICE OUR PROCESS: PowerPoint presentations plus a *mêtis* invention by groups in response to assigned questions on readings:

Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae*

Background: "Female Fetish Urban Form," pp. 304-354, in A. Bergren, *Weaving Truth. Language and the Female in Greek Thought*.

IV. FINAL PROJECT: Groups Present Final Projects in Class for Comments and Suggestions

seminar 7, November 5, seminar 8, November 12 , seminar 9, November 19,
seminar 10, December 3, Final Exam Session, Tuesday, December 8, 11:30 AM - 2:30 PM

Ancient sources for visual and conceptual stimulation:

O. Taplin, *Comic Angels and Other Approaches to Greek Drama through Vase-Painting*. Especially, Appendix 1: The Getty Birds.

J. Boardman, "The Phallos-Bird in Archaic and Classical Greek Art," *Revue Archéologique* (1992) 227-242.

D. Konstan, "Aristophanes' *Birds* and the City in the Air," *Arethusa* 23 (1990).

C. Smith, "Actors with Bird-Masks on Vases," *JHS* 2 (1881) 309-314.

L. Stone, *Costume in Aristophanic Comedy*.

V. Final Project Submission: due on Friday, December 11, by 4:00 in Ann Bergren's office: Dodd 248A

GRADING:

25% PRACTICE OUR PROCESS: PowerPoint presentations plus a *mêtis* invention by groups in response to assigned questions on readings from Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*

25% PRACTICE OUR PROCESS: PowerPoint presentations plus a *mêtis* invention by groups in response to assigned questions on readings: *Birds* and *Ecclesiazusae*

50% FINAL PROJECT: Presentation and Submission