# The Marriage of Peisthetairos to *Basileia* in the *Birds* of Aristophanes

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The *Birds* of Aristophanes ends with a spectacular marriage. The comic hero Peisthetairos is married to *Basileia,* the Sovereign of the Universe, and hailed as the highest of gods. She has in her the sovereignty of both the natural world and Athenian life; as the sometime wife of Zeus, she had been the true foundation of his rule. In gaining her as his wife and sharing her power, Peisthetairos overthrows Zeus and the other Olympian gods.

The argument of the play thus separates the content of the Olympian religion from its mythological form, in which it appears as distributed amongst a variety of gods united under the dominion of Zeus. That content lies in *Basileia,* and only by possessing her did Zeus have his power and meaning. Once it is revealed, however, that this content exists independently of him, Zeus loses his authority over men and Peisthetairos the Athenian Everyman can throw off the yoke of his rule. He can enjoy the content of the Olympian religion without the Olympian gods.

Thus *Birds* brings together both the objective content of the Olympian religion and the individuality that comes to possess that content for itself. That both these elements taken together define the argument of the play has tended to escape the notice of the critics of the *Birds.* The two most influential books on the interpretation of Aristophanes in the last twenty years, for example, are *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero*[1] and *Socrates and Aristophanes.*[2] The former understands *Birds* as the triumph of heroic individuality,[3] while the latter sees it as proclaiming "the fundamental requirements of the City."[4]

However, writing in the last issue of *Dionysius,* Rainer Friedrich describes the plays of Aristophanes *(inter alia)* as presènting a duality of subjectivity and objective institutions[5] similar to the one outlined above. For Friedrich the two elements are what he calls

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1. Cedric Whitman, *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964.
2. Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes.* New York: Basic Books, 1966.
3. Whitman, o.c., pp. 167-199.
4. Strauss, o.c., p. 193.
5. Rainer Friedrich, *"Euripidaristophanizein and Nietzschesokratizein:* Aristophanes, Nietzsche and the Death of Tragedy," *Dionysius,* IV (1980), pp. 17-23.

*polissittlichkeit* on the one hand and a spirit of critical reflexion on the other. The first is the life of the *polis* as lived through objective insitutions; the second is an independent subjectivity, that, for good or ill, insists on following its own thinking. Although both these are present in the plays of Aristophanes, they have a different relation to the intention of the poet. Aristophanes wishes to be a conservative and defend the traditional ways and insititutions against sophists and all those who undermine them by subjecting them to individual and critical judgement. But *malgré lui,* the poet imbibes to a certain extent what he attacks and himself becomes imbued with this critical spirit.[6] The poet is thus primarily a defender of the *polis* and by indirection an expositor of free subjectivity.

My view of the ending of *Birds* understands the relation of the old ways of the city and human individuality rather differently than does Friedrich; it sees the end affirming both elements with equal enthusiasm. To show more clearly the sense of that individuality, I propose to trace through the entire argument of *Birds*. This will also provide a test of Friedrich's general thesis about the relation of *polissittlichkeit* to the spirit of critical reflexion in Aristophanes. Although all the plays of Aristophanes deal in one form or another with this question, *Birds* treats this matter with a greater generality than do the other plays of Aristophanes. *Polissittlichkeit* had its completest expression and foundation in the Olympian religion, and more than in his other plays, Aristophanes treats in *Birds* the status and reality of the gods of that religion and their relation to the *polis*. The hero defects from the Olympian religion and the city associated with it, eventually overthrowing Zeus.

*Clouds* and *Plutus* might seem to treat these questions with an equal generality as *Birds*. In both there is either a temporary or permanent defection from ths Olympian religion and its city. The hero of *Clouds* never has so radical a relation to the gods as does Peisthetairos. He learns his atheism from Socrates, and only as a means for evading his debts; Peisthetairos defects from the Olympians through his own free choice. Although *Plutus* ends with the overthrow of the Olympian religion and its replacement by the title character, the old religion is never directly confronted. In *Birds,* Peisthetairos directly confronts and overthrows the gods of the Olympian religion.

His journey of discovery which ends in his marrying *Basileia* defines the argument of the play. He is a kind of Athenian

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6. l.c., p. 21.

Everyman, and so his career epitomizes the life of all Athens. His progress falls roughly speaking into two parts. First, one sees his rejection of the Olympian religion, as he develops his own bird-religion and bird-city. The second shows his turning away from this nature-religion and towards the Olympian, until finally he appropriates for himself the content of that religion in the spectacular manner outlined above.

The first scenes of the play show the increasing alienation of Peisthetairos and his partner Euelpides from the city of Athens and her gods. The play begins with their actual departure from Athens. They hate the litigiousness rampant there and the extreme individualism of which it is a symptom. Betraying most fully that individualism which they hate, they flee the corporate life of their native city.[7] They seek a city which will serve their own desires; one wants a city that will continually summon him to feasts,[8] and the other a city that will insist on his following his boy-loving bent.[9]

Arriving in bird-land after their flight from Athens, they ask the Hoopoe, Tereus, to indicate cities to them that will satisfy their desires. He suggests several, but all are rejected. No city in the actual world can satisfy them, since they insist on their every whimsy. They are compelled to give over their search in the real world, and instead to seek the city of their desires in the realm of imagination.

Euelpides proposes to live amongst the birds. For a man who has sought a city that will serve his natural desires, this provides the best alternative. While an actual city will always present some barrier or other to living out one's whimsy, life with the birds will not.

Peisthetairos carries this scheme of his partner's one step further. He suggests a city of the birds that can dominate both gods and men.[10] In proposing such a city, Peisthetairos hopes to give his passions a universal scope. As with his partner, his natural desires can know full satisfaction only if all barriers to their complete exercise are overturned. Thus the birds must have dominion over both those groups, gods and men, who might interfere.

With his scheme, Peisthetairos seeks to overcome his alienation from the human and divine realm. He will not by conforming to their established order give over his restlessness and find peace.

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7. *Birds* 1-48.
8. *Birds* 128-134.
9. *Birds* 137-142.
10. *Birds* 162-193.

Rather, he will find a city of his own from the birds and compel these already formed communities of gods and men to submit to his will and desire.

This expansiveness and tyranny of spirit had its counterpart in the actual life of Athens. Shortly before *Birds* was presented on the stage, the Syracusan expedition had set forth, of which Alcibiades had been a principal instigator. The historical Athens had known no bounds in its imperial aggressiveness, and the fictional but representative Athenian makes the entire cosmos the arena for his tyrannical soul.

Almost to identify Peisthetairos with Alcibiades and to see in the play a representation of contemporary history, as one important critic does[11], is to overlook very important differences. The ambition of the comic hero is of a different order than that which moved Athens. It begins explicitly in the realm of imagination, and therefore can include a more universal realm, that of gods and men, or in a sense, the entire universe. The imperial ambitions of Athens are necessarily limited to the conquest of actual countries.

Peisthetairos now faces the difficult task of persuading the birds to undertake his scheme of founding their universal city. He has no expectation of any difficulty that lies in this; but at first the birds wish to kill him and his partner simply because they are men.[12] As natural creatures they quite understandably look on men with a certain disfavour. Only when they are told that Peisthetairos believes the whole world to be theirs,[13] do they give over their hostility to men.

In this initial opposition of the birds to Peisthetairos' scheme, an important point becomes clear. The birds do not have knowledge of their own omnipotence, nor do they plan any scheme which will assure them of it. Only the man Peisthetairos ascribes to these natural creatures their infinite power and hopes to see them rule.

Thus even when the birds have agreed to hear him, Peisthetairos must declare to them their own divinity. This he does in a very interesting speech, in which he declares a religion directly contrary in its import to the Olympian.[14] He begins by telling the birds that once they were kings, of all things, both men and gods, because they were older than Kronos, the Titans, and Earth.

With this, Peisthetairos begins his creative transformation of the

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11. J. W. Süvern, *Essay on the Birds of Aristophanes,* Tr. by W. R. Hamilton, London, 1835.
12. *Birds* 322-365.
13. *Birds* 422-426.
14. *Birds* 462-626.

Hesiodic *Theogony*. Kronos, the Titans and Earth all figure prominently in that poet's cosmogony. Birds do not, and they hardly appear there as the oldest of primeval beings. To suit his purpose, Peisthetairos has simply added this mythological datum. More important than adding beings to Hesiod's account, Peisthetairos has changed the entire sense of that account. Taken in its entirety, the Hesiodic account in no way implies that mere antiquity determines who amongst the deities are the true kings. Rather, the true kings emerge only after a long history of the gods has evolved. First came such gods as Earth, Ouranos and Kronos. These are overthrown by the Titans. Then the Titans are overthrown by the Olympians, who now rule. The more natural deities have given way to the more rational; sheer antiquity has not guaranteed real dominion.

Peisthetairos must transform the Hesiodic account because he is altogether incapable of understanding it. The logic that animates this account, that the more natural deities must give way to the more rational, can have no meaning for him. While he acknowledges it as a brute fact that the Olympians reign currently, he can imagine and think only of the birds, these natural creatures, as truly being gods. The Olympians he regards as unsurpers whom some adventitious circumstance elevated to power.

The birds themselves are of course thoroughly surprised to learn of their sometime divinity. They have lost not only the reality of their earlier kingship but also all remembrance of it. Usually, both might and knowledge are thought to be attributes of deity. At present, and presumably for a very long time, the birds have had neither. An oblivion of their own divinity has come over them, which Peisthetairos is at very little pains to explain. Just as he can give no account of their fall from power, he cannot explain their nescience.

Only a man can rescue them from their present fallen condition and begin the hard work of restoring them to their former glory. This gives a thoroughly ludicrous turn to a real and important aspect of Greek religion. In one way, men were regarded in the Greek religion as the creators of their gods. Homer and Hesiod, says Herodotus, made a theogony for the Greeks and assigned to the gods their epithets.[15] In a non-comic view of the matter, this did not in any way derogate from the real existence and eternal splendour of the gods. Homer appeals to the Muse to sing his poem; Peisthetairos treats his gods as little better than ignorant school-girls.

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15. Herodotus, *Historiae*, II, 53.

Because of the birds' great surprise at learning of their divinity, Peisthetairos undertakes to demonstrate it to them. He repeats his argument that their antiquity proves their kingship. He then adduces two kinds of arguments to support his thesis. First, he argues that men used to be ruled by birds and that remnants of this rule are still extant. His arguments to support this have a logic, as the saying is, all their own. Thus in Phoenicia and Egypt, he says, men fall to their labours in the fields at the cry of the cuckoo. To Peisthetairos this shows the great power and directing might of the birds. A logic less sublime than that of Peisthetairos would find in this not the supremacy of the birds but the ingenuity of men in using a natural event for their own ends. Again, Peisthetairos finds in the birds carved upon the sceptres of kings, evidence of their rule. Theologians of another stripe would perhaps find in these birds only symbols of the royal power.

The second kind of argument Peisthetairos adduces as proof of the birds' sometime rule, is from the practice of the Olympians themselves. Zeus, he says, has an eagle on his head, Athena an owl, and Apollo a falcon. He alludes here to various statues to be found in the Hellenic world, and he assumes that the birds represent the reality of the divinity there depicted. As before, Peisthetairos reverses the sense which the Olympian religion found in such representations. It saw in Zeus, Athena, and Apollo the divine powers, and in the birds which accompany them, merely symbols of their rule. In this, the Greek religion broke with the Egyptian religion. In the celebrated statue of King Cephren with the falcon on his shoulder, both the bird and the man are incarnations of the god Horus. This religion rather than the Greek is the appropriate one for the Peisthetairean interpretation of birds. His view of the eagle as the true power of Zeus is just as accurate as seeing the eagle as the reality of the American Republic.

With such-like evidences of the birds' dominion Peisthetairos contrasts their present degradation. Men catch them in traps and sell them; they treat them as food and roast them. Far from worshipping them as before, men regard the birds as altogether subject to their dominion.

His speech has its desired effect on the birds. They hail Peisthetairos as their Saviour, whom shortly before they had tried to kill as their worst enemy. They commit themselves to his presidency, in order to regain their former dominion, which until recently they had never heard of. Now they declare the possession of it as essential to their very existence.

Having inflamed them with desire for dominion, Peisthetairos next tells the birds how it might best be regained. He urges them to

form one *polis* whose fortification can enclose the air. This done, a messenger can be dispatched to Zeus, who will reclaim the dominion from him. If Zeus refuse, Peisthetairos proposes a blockade against the gods of a most original kind. They were wont to make their way through the air en route to various mortal objects of their desire. He now suggests that the birds place "on their dissolute persons a seal, their evil designs to prevent."[16] Peisthetairos thus finds in the natural and human side of the gods, their weakest point, where they may be most effectually attacked. The gods do not seem capable of controlling their passions.

Peisthetairos also proposes an embassy to mortals to demand recognition of the birds' dominion. Men can best show their submission to the new gods by revising their system of sacrifice. Rather than sacrificing only to the Olympian gods, they should offer sacrifice first to the appropriate bird, and only then to the god in question.

The birds wonder if men will so quickly recognize them as deities as the sanguine expectations of Peisthetairos imply. Just as he had a scheme for bringing the gods to heel, our hero has devised a course of action if men are recalcitrant. The birds will devour all the planted seed and pluck out the eyes of oxen used for ploughing. The men will look to Demeter and Apollo, respectively, to supply them with grain and to heal their maimed animals. But, says Peisthetairos, these gods will fail to do that which the men expect of them, and this failure will lead men to acknowledge the birds as gods. Peisthetairos implies that men regard these as their deities, who can control that system which supplies their natural wants. Thus he thinks that the birds and not the Olympians will be recognized as the true deities.

Then Peisthetairos declares that men will receive the greatest benefits from the birds once they have acknowledged them as gods. The birds find this difficult to credit. Again, they are shown to be deities of a very particular kind, who must be instructed in the nature and power of their own deity. Among the benefits which they will confer on men Peisthetairos lists pest-free crops, wealth and long life.

Peisthetairos completes his account of the blessings which the birds will bestow on men by declaring the comparative ease and lack of expense in maintaining the bird-cultus. At present, men are put to great expense in building temples for worship of the gods and in journeying to the seats of various oracles to consult them. The birds can be both worshipped and consulted by visiting those

16. Translation by B. B. Rogers.

easily accessible trees where the birds live. The realm of nature and that of religion will be straightaway one.

The birds thereupon declare their complete adherence to the programme of Peisthetairos for regaining their lost dominion. They propose that in the enterprise which will accomplish this, they undertake whatever demands brawn and there be left to Peisthetairos whatever needs the workings of intelligence. Even here the more rational side of the proposed religion belongs not to the deities themselves but to a man. This situation is soon somewhat modified, as Peisthetairos together with his partner enter the nest of the nightingale, and having eaten a magic root, themselves become birds. The human intelligence which initiated the religion is now more completely joined to the deities of that religion.

Next the birds address the audience directly in the *parabasis.*[17] In this they display none of their earlier diffidence about their divinity. They confidently celebrate their religion before the spectators. This celebration consists of seven parts. In four of these the birds speak directly to the audience about the excellence of their life and what it means to men. In the other three, the birds rejoice in their own life and its excellence.

The *commation* sees the birds appeal to the nightingale, that with her beautiful voice she begin their song. Next in the *parabasis* which follows, the birds declare to the audience their divinity. This they show in a two-part argument, giving first a cosmogony and then an account of their extreme usefulness to men.

They begin their cosmogony by contrasting their own immortality and high knowledge with mankind's impotence and nescience. They speak from a full knowledge of, and confidence in, their deity. They then begin to sing a cosmogony which is in many respects similar to that of Hesiod. At first, they say, there were Chaos, and Night and Darkness; Earth and Ether and Heaven were not. Night bore an egg out of which came Eros. He in turn brought the race of the birds into being, before Heaven, Ocean and the whole race of the Olympians. Thus the birds are older than these, and by implication more divine. That antiquity which had counted for little in Hesiod the birds regard as establishing their divinity on the surest foundation.

After this, the birds seek to show their divinity by declaring some of the great gifts men receive from them. They mention first that their presence declares the seasons. The appearance of various birds indicates to men when, for example, to sow seed, and when

17. *Birds* 676-800.

to wear light or heavy clothing. They thus associate their help with men's efforts to feed and clothe themselves. Next they claim to be the true oracles for men, and to show that men have regard to birds as signs showing whether or not to undertake this or that activity. Here as before, the birds reveal themselves as useful instruments, who indicate to men the appropriate time to undertake various daily activities.

In the *pnigos* which follows this proof of their divinity, the birds name various benefits which men will gain if they acknowledge the birds as gods. First, they will be available to men as oracles at all times. Second, unlike Zeus who rules from above the birds promise to be always present, in order to give men health, happiness and revels.

The *pnigos* thus 'improves' on the *parabasis* in terms of what the birds can do for men. The latter had shown the birds' excellence in the aid the birds give to men in pursuing their activities. In the *pnigos* the birds promise to give men a variety of natural goods which will conduce to their material well-being.

In the strophe, the birds turn toward their own life. They address the Woodland Muse as the source of music, that both of birds and of men. With her aid, the chorus say, they sing his songs to Pan and dances to the mountain mother. From there, they say further, Phrynichus, the tragedian, derives his own song.

The Olympian religion had seen Apollo as the Lord of the Muses and had associated with itself that realm of beauty. The birds now claim this realm for their religion. They still associate music with a Muse but with a natural, and not a heavenly, one.

In the *epirrhema* which follows, the chorus again address the spectators. Now they contrast the joys of their own life, which they urge the spectators to join, with the toils they suffer amidst the many repressions of *polis*-life. They say that everything which at Athens is accounted shameful by law is with them thought excellent. Then the birds enumerate various offenders against institutional life at Athens who are quite welcome amongst the birds. First, they urge any would-be father-beaters to join them. Father-beating attacks the integrity of the family and is thus prohibited at Athens; the birds welcome such people. Second, they encourage runaway slaves to join them. The whole civic life of Athens depended on the distinction between slaves and free men, but amongst the birds, it has no authority. Third, foreigners who have masqueraded as Athenians are encouraged to join the birds. The Athenians claimed to be autochthonous and the distinction between foreigner and citizen was very strong. Last, the birds appeal to various traitors to Athens, that they too come to live with

them. Even those who have aimed at destroying the life of the very city of which they are citizens, the birds say are welcome to join them.

The birds imagine that those whose actions declare them most strongly opposed to the *polis* are the most likely of all the spectators to join them. They imply as well, however, that all the spectators are in some measure alienated from the life of their city and amenable to the new ways. They thus offer their way of life as an alternative to the old way which has proved unsatisfactory.

After this appeal to the audience there follows another celebration of the birds' proper life in the antistrophe. Here they sing of the beauty of the swans' music and its power. When the swans praise Apollo, their music rises Olympus-ward and amazes all the gods. The Muses and Graces there then sing in antiphonal response. Thus the beauty of even heaven's music has its origin with the birds. They and not the Muses are the true lords of beauty.

The last appeal to the audience, the *antepirrhema,* which follows, again shows the life of the birds in relation to aesthetic matters. Here they appear rather as offering a vulgar alternative to men's attendance at the dramatic festival and not as in the ode just before, as the friends of culture. They suggest to men the advantages of having wings when the tragedy no longer holds their attention and lesser desires than that of enjoying the pleasures appropriate to tragedy possess their souls. Thus if they grow hungry, or feel a need to move their bowels while at the tragedy, wings would enable them to fly away and fulfil these desires. Similarly if a man spots the husband of his paramour at the festival, he can fly away, to enjoy undetected the pleasure of her charms.

This last appeal to the audience contrasts the constraints of the dramatic festival with the natural freedom of the birds. The tragic drama had as its patron the god Dionysus; in it the Olympian religion received its completest artistic expression. Thus against the intellectual demands of the Olympian religion the birds offer various natural pleasures. The life of the birds here appears as the direct contradiction of the cult of the Olympians.

This offer is of the same kind as the one that suggested to father-beaters and traitors that they come to live with the birds. The natural freedom of the birds was contrasted with the restrictions of *polis*-life. This life is of course inseparable from the acknowledgement of the Olympian gods. Thus both direct appeals to the audience have contrasted the new bird religion with the Olympian religion. In the one case the life of the birds is contrasted

with the political form of the old religion, and in the other it is compared to the intellectual and artistic form of the Olympian religion.

The *parabasis* as a whole has fallen into two main divisions. The commation, the strophe, and the antistrophe have all celebrated the life of the birds in itself. The other sections of the *parabasis*, the *parabasis* proper, *pnigos*, *epirrhema*, and *antepirrhema* have compared the life of the birds and the bird-religion to the life of the *polis* under the Olympian gods and its religion. Those sections that declared the glory of the birds showed them as presiding over a natural paradise which is identical with the realm of beauty and music. The other sections compared the ease of life with the birds to the rigours of the life of the *polis* and under the Olympians in general. The birds offer natural freedom and the indulgence of every desire and whimsy. This they contrast with that subordination of fancy to law and of desire to intellect which they say obtains in the institutions established under the aegis of the Olympians.

The *parabasis* has presented the new bird religion as coming into being in opposition to the Olympian religion. The following scene[18] shows the explicit founding of the bird-religion; here too there is a mixture of bird and Olympian principles. Thus it is decided to name the new city Cloudcuckoobury, in accordance with the earlier idea of founding a city between gods and men; on the other hand it is decided to keep Athena as the city-protector. Again, the place of the city's founding is said to be the 'plain of Phlegra where the gods outdid the giants in the game of boasting.' In this it is implied that the new city is itself established by effrontery. Yet, Peisthetairos directs Euelpides to supervise the building of fortifications for this city created in the scheming imaginations of men; he also instructs Euelpides to send messengers both to gods and men, to proclaim the new city.

This contradictory relation between the old and new occurs in an even more extreme form when the inaugural sacrifices for the new city are offered. The form of the sacrifice follows that which obtained for the worship of the Olympians at Athens, as a priest prays to all the Olympian birds and birdesses. Yet there is really no occasion for sacrifice amongst the birds. Sacrifice implies a distance between the worshipper and his deity, which the sacrifice seeks to overcome. Yet amongst the birds, there is no distinction between devotees and deities. The *parabasis* had encouraged men to partake of the life of their gods, and immediately before the sacrifice, Peisthetairos and Euelpides had themselves appeared as birds.

18. *Birds* 801-1057.

Thus the present sacrifice presents the curious spectacle of birds in their capacity as worshippers offering sacrifice to birds in their capacity as deities.

A crow-priest begins to offer the sacrifices but he is soon given his *congé* by Peisthetairos who takes this office upon himself. He has hardly begun them again when he is interrupted by a series of visitors, a poet, an oracle-monger, Meton, a decree-seller and a commissioner. All come with the intention of gaining some personal benefit from the new city, in perfect accord, it would seem, with that aspect of the *parabasis* which promised happiness amongst the birds to all manner of quacks. Yet with one exception, that quack of quacks, Peisthetairos expels them all ignominiously from the city, with nothing gained.

All of the visitors are τεχνῖται associated with the old order, and in this lies their expulsion from Cloudcuckoobury. The τεχνίτης stands in a double relation to his τέχνη. On the one hand he devotes himself to the end which his craft is designed to serve, as a poet, for example devotes himself to the creation of a certain kind of beauty. On the other hand, he can look to the way in which his τέχνη can be of use to himself as in the case of the poet who now visits Cloudcuckoobury in expectation of receiving money in payment for his poems.

All the τεχνῖται who visit Cloudcuckoobury have a greater interest in how their τέχνη can benefit them than in accomplishing anything for the good of the new city through it. The poet's poem suggests that he be given a cloak. The oracle-monger produces oracles which direct Peisthetairos to feed him. Meton hopes to exercise his surveying skills on the new city; the decree-seller and commissioner come as imperial officials hoping to bilk the colonials under the guise of enforcing imperial law.

Except for the poet, all the visitors are expelled by Peisthetairos. This expulsion must at first glance appear strange. He is, after all, no defender of the old order, who insists on men being devoted to the objectivity of their τέχνη. Rather, as a man who has liberated himself from the restraints of city-life he should find in the visitors kindred spirits and sharers in his liberation. However his self-seeking spirit which wishes to dominate an entire city and the whole universe, cannot tolerate any colleagues. A tyrant has no friends.

Further, although Peisthetairos has driven away the visitors for no very good motive, he has acted even if unknowingly in accord with the developing life of the new city. The founding of the city, including the inaugural sacrifices, had shown it to be a thoroughly contradictory mixture of the old ways and the new one proposed

by, and embodied in, the birds. The visitors reflect that contradiction, and their expulsion shows the new city freeing itself of all attachments to the old order. The visitors are sufficiently liberated from the old order to look on it primarily as a means of private aggrandizement. Yet they can exercise their self-seeking only in relation to certain existing spheres of city life, whose spirit they do not respect. They are the parasites of the old order, who to that extent still depend on it.

Peisthetairos has a significantly different relation to the forms and shapes of the old order. Like the five visitors he looks to the life of the city only in so far as it can benefit him; he like them has little or no interest in the objectivity of its laws, institutions and ways. Yet his subjective relation to the life of the city is far more extreme. They exercise their individuality upon one or other aspect of that life. Peisthetairos wants an entire city of his own which will satisfy his own desires; he thinks, moreover, that the satisfaction of these desires demands a city that will dominate even the immortal gods.

Peisthetairos, however, only comes gradually to see that living in the new city and living in the old order are not compatible. Thus he was willing to see Athena retained as patron-goddess of the new city; this accords ill with his earlier introduction of the religion of the birds in the cult of the new city. Morever, he has directed Euelpides to supervise the construction of city-walls for Cloudcuckoobury, which, as will appear later, exists for imagination and thought rather than physically and materially. This contradiction in the soul of Peisthetairos, that he desires elements of both the Olympian and the bird order, is quite understandable given the origin of his devotion to the new order. It has arisen through his alienation from, and hatred of, the Olympian order and its manifestation in the *polis*. He and the new city that he has founded retain elements of that from which they began.

In expelling the five visitors, Peisthetairos also expels what they stand for from himself. The visitors stand between the two worlds of the Olympian order and the bird-order now coming into being. They are self-seeking, but they are amateurs at this in comparison with the professional egoism and quackery of Peisthetairos. Despite themselves, they still genuflect to the forms of city life they seek to despoil. Peisthetairos must press on to a world where his imagination and desire are wholly a law unto themselves. In expelling the five visitors, he moves a step closer to the attainment of that goal. This expulsion of the τεχνῖται with their partial adherence to the Olympian order is followed by the second

parabasis[19] in which the birds proclaim their universal rule, and make no mention of the Olympian order. They speak of themselves as the all-powerful and all-knowing beings to whom all mortals are now offering sacrifice. They further speak of themselves as providing a natural paradise for men. Unlike the doubting creatures of a few scenes ago, the birds now triumphantly proclaim their divinity.

In the *epirrhema* they now give commands to men and proclaim laws to them. The earlier *epirrhema* had seen the birds suggesting to the spectators that they would find life amongst the birds more agreeable than at Athens. Now they assume the direction of human life. They first offer a reward to anyone who will slay Diagoras the Melian. According to the scholiast he had profaned the Mysteries, which as nature gods the birds would feel an affinity for. They also order the liberation of any birds still in captivity. The birds thus assume their ruling might and their capacity to see any remaining obstacles to their complete dominion removed.

The antistrophe again celebrates the natural paradise in which the birds live and over which they preside. The *antepirrhema* then makes a few suggestions to the judges of the dramatic festival, on how they might show their refined tastes in awarding the victory. In the previous *antepirrhema* the birds had proposed being winged as a means whereby the tragic festival might be fled. Now the birds claim to control the comic festival. They offer rewards to those who show their discernment by voting for the birds and punishment for those who prove to lack literary insight.

Thus the parabasis claims total dominion. The strophe declares the birds to be all-seeing and all-controlling. The *epirrhema* shows their rule of human community. The *antistrophe* celebrates their natural paradise, and the *antepirrhema* their rule of drama. They compete with no other gods, as in the first *parabasis,* but think themselves all in all.

Thus the new religion with the political arrangements appropriate to it has attained its completeness. The remainder of the play will show Peisthetairos' discovering the limitations of the bird religion and his rejecting it. He will find only in *Basileia* a rule that he neither can, nor wishes to, overthrow.

The arrival of a messenger with news about the wall whose building he has commanded first shows Peisthetairos the limitations of Cloudcuckoobury.[20] The messenger is jubilant as he describes to Peisthetairos the role of various birds in the extremely

19. *Birds* 1058-1117.
20. *Birds* 1118-1167.

difficult project of erecting the City's fortifications. Rather than rejoicing in this account, Peisthetairos frowns, and when asked if he is not happy with the account given him replies that it seems like a pack of lies to him. Although he had himself ordered the project, he cannot now believe in its accomplishment. The birds do not now seem capable to him of τέχνη.

He had imagined them to be capable of it when he had directed the undertaking of the project. Yet between that time and this, the various τεχνῖται have appeared and been expelled. In expelling them he has expelled τέχνη itself from the new city. The second parabasis has, moreover, confirmed this tendency within the new city. It has celebrated the natural paradise over which the birds preside and in which they live. It has no need of τέχνη because in τέχνη there is implied always a deficiency of the natural, which must be developed by human ingenuity or even transformed and opposed. But in a natural paradise, the fulfilment of every excellence is present, and there is no need of any further development. His consciousness of this natural paradise makes Peisthetairos doubt the building of the wall.

The birds themselves, as the speech of their messenger indicates, think that they have built the wall and practised many aspects of τέχνη in so doing. They cannot distinguish between what they have done in imagination and what in actuality. In the natural paradise these two realms are directly and straightaway one. What they imagined they have done, they have in fact done. That Peisthetairos can see that the birds have not built the walls shows a certain distance in him from the natural paradise.

Peisthetairos is soon proved right in his doubt of their having built the wall[21] by the intelligence that a god has entered Cloudcuckoobury. She has somehow penetrated the walls and evaded the militia sent to arrest her. The defences of the city prove wholly illusory.

Peisthetairos finally confronts the malefactress, who turns out to be Iris. Under strong cross-questioning by Peisthetairos, she says that she is en route to earth, that she might urge men to again offer sacrifice to the gods. This shows that the new City has been quite successful in weaning men from their allegiance to the Olympians. They have stopped offering sacrifices to them, and the gods seek their resumption.

Peisthetairos shows respect neither for the person of Iris nor for her mission. He accuses her of trespass in trying to pass through Cloudcuckoobury on her way to earth. That she seeks to have men

21. *Birds* 1168-1261.

reinstitute their sacrifices, he finds no excuse. Sacrifices, he thinks, should be offered to the true deities, the birds, and not to the Olympians. He threatens her with violence, and she takes herself off to Olympus.

Her visit has shown both the strength and the weakness of Cloudcuckoobury. The very fact of her intended visit to earth shows the popularity of the new bird-religion and its ability to draw men away from the old religion. However, the easy progress of Iris through the city of Cloudcuckoobury reveals its incompleteness. The walls have not kept her out, nor have the militia of the place proved capable of apprehending her. The city has a real vigour but lacks all articulation of its life into established roles and particular offices; the militia like the walls of the city are imaginary rather than real aspects of its life.

The recently acquired devotion of men to the birds has caused the journey of Iris earthward. Now a messenger comes to announce that men in general have gone bird-mad and that myriads will soon be arriving in Cloudcuckoobury to demand wings. Thus the great attractive power of the birds is again revealed. The three visitors who do arrive all expect a city which will allow them to pursue their every desire, without let or hindrance. They all wish a city very much akin to the natural paradise of the second *parabasis*. Thus they wish a city whose deficiencies have just been shown through the visit of Iris.

Therefore, the arrival of the three visitors gives Peisthetairos the occasion to clarify the nature of the city which he has founded.[22] They want the city to subserve their desires, as if there were no difference between the life of the city and the life of individuals. In the course of their visits, Peisthetairos will try to show the visitors that the city has an objective life of its own, to which their particular desires and interests must be radically subordinated. This will prove to be also a part of Peisthetairos' education in the nature of the City.

The first visitor is a would-be father-beater. He wishes to be winged so that he can enjoy that alleged law of the birds that will allow him to beat his father. This young man hopes by strangling his father to inherit his wealth and thereby to earn his living. Peisthetairos suggests to him that he instead embark upon a career in the army and leave his father in peace. The young man, if left to his own devices, would profit through his belligerence but at the expense of his family. He has a thoroughly ambiguous relation to the family. He hopes to benefit from that law of inheritance which

22. *Birds* 1337-1469.

is an aspect of family life; yet he feels no barrier to his murdering the head of that very institution which will profit him. Peisthetairos intuits the possibilities within the young man; he can see, one imagines, a strong individuality, and a strong, if perverse, attachment to the institution of the family. Thus Peisthetairos does not propose to obliterate these elements within the young man but to transmute them. His belligerence will be directed against an enemy of the State and he will be unambiguously attached to his own State. His devotion to the State will have a primacy which his own desire must be subordinate to. The young man accepts the advice of Peisthetairos and receives wings in order to fight on behalf of his country in Thrace.

The next would-be possessor of wings is the poet Cinesias. He hopes by being winged to fly among the clouds and discover thoughts to include in his poetry. Peisthetairos suggests to him that he undertake the training of a chorus of the birds. A chorus would have had a role in one or other festivals of the State, and thus Peisthetairos seeks to give his poetic ability a place in the life of the State. Cinesias makes it clear that he regards this suggestion as a joke and then flies away. He finds it offensive that his τέχνη, which is his ability to write poetry, should be regarded as something other than a private possession. He receives no wings and thus is not a full member of the community.

The experiences of these two visitors have revealed a revolution in the meaning of being winged compared to what it had earlier meant. The second *parabasis* had declared the life of the birds to be a natural paradise. Here, however, the young man has received wings because he has agreed to serve the State. Participation in the life of the State rather than in the natural paradise thus appears as the meaning of being winged.

With the third visitor, this new meaning of being winged receives its fullest and most explicit expression. An informer arrives, who hopes by being winged to practise his informing more effectively. Peisthetairos seeks to dissuade him from this crooked means of earning a living and reminds him that there are many honourable callings to choose from. The informer tells Peisthetairos to stop nagging him and to wing him without further delay. Peisthetairos then tells him that by speaking[23] (λέγων) he is in fact winging him. He goes on to say that all men are winged by λόγοι. This is possible because ὑπὸ γὰρ λόγων ὁ νοῦς τε μετεωρίζεται ἐπαίρεταί τ' ἄνθρωπος.[24]

23. *Birds* 1437.
24. *Birds* 1447-1448.

Thus Peisthetairos now understands being winged as the right working of the mind. Before being winged had meant a flight from established institutions (as at the beginning of the play or the first *parabasis*), or the enjoyment of the natural passions. The action of the play has now clarified it to mean the well-being of the mind in its being moved by reason.

This well-being is also connected with one's activity in the world, as Peisthetairos' treatment of the father-beater and Cinesias has shown. He also tries to move the informer by reasoning with him, to a better way of life. After telling him that the mind goes aloft through reasons, he adds οὕτω καὶ σ'ἐγὼ ἀναπτερώσας βούλομαι χρηστοῖς λόγοις τρέψαι πρὸς ἔργον νόμιμον.[25] As before, Peisthetairos seeks to give the informer a τέχνη that will be conducive to the public good. Thus individual reason must find its fulfilment in relation to the community.

The informer has no desire to be reformed. He is so corrupt that in order to persuade him Peisthetairos has been moved to give him the most explicit explanation of being winged. Yet his corruption resists even this. Thus rather than giving him wings, Peisthetairos beats him with wings. The rationality of the State appears to him only as coercion and punishment.

So the scene of the three visitors shows Peisthetairos presiding over a community which has an objective life of its own. Individuals participate in it by acknowledging the life of the State as primary and their own particular activity as contributing to and subordinate to, that common life. Their rationality, moreover, lies in their acceptance of this reality.

By attaining this consciousness of the State's objective existence, Peisthetairos might seem simply to accept again that State which he had earlier flown away from. After all, the place of insitutions in this new city seems remarkably similar to that in the human city which the Olympian gods preside over. In both cases, the individual finds his true being and happiness in accepting certain objective forms as providing the shapes within which he lives.

But there is a significant difference between the city over which Peisthetairos now presides and the one which he has left behind. The latter had existed altogether independently of him, and he was bound to it not by free assent but rather by his birth as an Athenian. The former, the new city, has come into existence through the experience of Peisthetairos himself. Having first rejected the objective life to the city, he now gives his assent to it. His acceptance arises from his experience of having rejected it.

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25. *Birds* 1448-1450.

Through a process that began with his rejection of the Olympian religion and the city that incarnates it, Peisthetairos has discovered a city similar to the one that he had earlier rejected. Thus he has attained for himself what earlier had been given through religion and the gods. Peisthetairos would seem to have no further need of the Olympian gods.

Thus the last scene of the play shows the overthrow of the Olympian gods and Peisthetairos' attainment of that which is real and eternal in them.[26] This occurs in three stages. First the god Prometheus arrives in Cloudcuckoobury. He announces the demise of the Olympian order and tells Peisthetairos of its true ruler, *Basileia,* whose hand in marriage he is to demand of the embassy from Olympus which will soon arrive. Second, the embassy arrives, and the deficiencies of the Olympian religion are revealed. The embassy finally agree to give *Basileia* to Peisthetairos. Third, the marriage of Peisthetairos to *Basileia* is celebrated amidst triumphal shouts.

Prometheus arrives with the amazing intelligence that Zeus has been overthrown. When Peisthetairos expresses his incredulity at this, he explains that no one any longer sacrifices to the Olympians, on account of the new city. The gods as a result are compelled to fast, and the barbarian gods threaten to march upon Zeus unless their food supply is restored. Peisthetairos queries the existence of barbarian gods until he is told that they are the ancestral gods of foreigners.

If the character of the new city as it was seen developing in the scene of the three visitors is compared to the state of Olympus as described by Prometheus, his intelligence will become clearer. With the advent of the visitors, the new city showed its control over τέχνη; the particular craft or skill of an individual was subordinated to the life of the City as a whole. The informer, whose craft was a declaration of war against the common good, was soundly thrashed for his efforts. The gods, however, do not have so definite a control over τέχνη as this; they are dependent for their food supply on the sacrifices of men. The wills of men have a certain independence of the gods, and now that they have proved disobliging, the gods are thrown into a quandary. This appears as a division within their ranks between Olympians and barbarian gods; the latter are concerned with their natural wants, the satisfaction of which they look for to the Olympians, who are thus seen to have a political and directing role.

In the new city, political reason rules and can bring men to

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26. *Birds* 1494-1765.

obedience. Amongst the gods natural desire rules, which compels them to seek a treaty of peace with the new city. Prometheus urges Peisthetairos to make no peace unless Zeus agree to hand over *Basileia* to him as wife. She has in her control, he says, "the thunderbolt of Zeus and all other things, good counsel, good laws, prudence, the shipyards, revilement, and paymaster, and the three-obol piece."[27] In short, she contains Zeus' sovereignty over nature and the city.

Prometheus thus thinks, in so advising Peisthetairos, that he can accomplish a far greater philanthropy than when he gave man fire and with it the capacity for all the arts. He had stolen fire from the gods, and now he wishes, having deprived Zeus of *Basileia*, to bestow it upon men. In him lies the desire not only of communicating the life of the gods to men, but of depriving the gods of that same life in the process.

When Prometheus' scheme proves successful, as it will, with the arrival of the ambassadors from Olympus, sovereign power in the universe will have had an interesting history. It first belonged to the Titans or nature powers, of whom Prometheus was one. Then with his help, it passed to the more rational Olympians, of whom Zeus is chief, and who overthrew the Titans. Next it will pass to Peisthetairos, who beginning as a devotee of the Olympian religion, defected to the nature religion of the birds, and then reformed his city so that it resembled the one presided over by the Olympians.

The question of who possesses the sovereignty depends on who has the completest relation to both the nature and the rational powers. Before the arising of the Olympians, the Titans ruled without suffering any opposition. Their overthrow by the Olympians seemed to invest these latter with the true sovereignty. Yet since they have overthrown the nature powers, they suffer to a certain extent the unfreedom of being merely opposed to them. From this arises the danger to their rule of one who like Prometheus has a less negative relation to the nature powers. Having begun as a Titan and then sided with the Olympians in their war against the Titans, he has direct experience of both; this of course Zeus and the Olympians lack. Only after a long struggle can Zeus bring Prometheus within his dominion.

Peisthetairos unites within himself the relation of both Zeus and Prometheus to the nature and rational powers. His career begins from a life lived within a city presided over by the Olympian gods; he shares in a life that is primarily theirs. By his own free act, he

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27. *Birds* 1538-1541.

leaves this and founds the city and religion of the birds; he has thus experienced the life of the nature powers. This last he shares with Prometheus and not with Zeus. Like Prometheus again, he moves from his devotion to the nature powers to his overthrowing them. Then unlike Prometheus he has not remained a figure in transition from the nature powers to the more rational ones. Rather, Zeus-like he presides over a community in which the rational and political rules. Therefore like Zeus he knows and experiences the priority of the rational. But like Prometheus he has experienced the natural and the transition from the natural powers to the rational.

This transfer of the Sovereignty which thus truly belongs to Peisthetairos actually occurs with the arrival of the ambassadors after the departure of Prometheus. There are three, who represent the variety of gods on Olympus. Poseidon, brother of Zeus, is a pure-bred Olympian. A certain Triballian is one of the barbarian gods mentioned above. Heracles is the son of Zeus by a mortal woman who by his efforts has gained heaven. Thus Poseidon represents the rational powers, the Triballian the natural, and the hero Heracles partakes of both.

The behaviour of this unlikely crew shows very clearly why all is not well on Olympus. The aristocratic Poseidon criticizes the somewhat proletarian Triballian for the way his cloak hangs; the barbarian shows no deference but open defiance in response. Heracles, despite his being an ambassador for peace threatens violence against the Cloudcuckooburians. His stability of character is a somewhat doubtful matter.

As the three approach Peisthetairos, Heracles learns that he is cooking some birds and quickly becomes less belligerent. The birds in question had risen against the democratic party and thus suffer punishment. The democratic party rules at Cloudcuckoobury because, as was shown in the scene of the three visitors, all are capable of participating in that reason which rules that State; true birdhood has been there defined as possessing that rationality. Anti-democratic birds are either oligarchic, aristocratic or the like, and they define participation in the political life of the State by some such criterion as birth or wealth. Such criteria speak more to the natural than to the rational side of birdiness; those, such as the anti-democrats who so define the true nature of birds, have rendered themselves natural rather than rational creatures and thus fit for eating. That Peisthetairos, moreover, can so regard them, shows his firm hold on the true nature of being winged as rationality.

Poseidon proposes a peace to the birds in which they would be granted participation in a natural paradise. He thus has no

knowledge of their progress and of how little such a proposal can please them. Peisthetairos of course rejects this and proposes that instead the sceptre of Zeus be given to the birds. Poseidon demurs at this at first, until Peisthetairos explains it as a scheme whereby the birds will become the enforcers of the Olympians' laws, when he enthusiastically embraces it; such an arrangement would make no effective change in the Olympians' dominion.

Poseidon imagines all difficulties resolved when Peisthetairos demands *Basileia* as his wife. Heracles, hungry for the birds now cooking, is happy to do whatever is necessary to appease Peisthetairos. The natural side of Heracles thus begins to prevail.

Poseidon seeks to renew his allegiance to his Olympian side by reminding him of his close connexion to Zeus and how he will benefit from it if he helps to maintain his sovereignty. When Zeus dies, says Poseidon, Heracles will be his heir and inherit all that he has. Thus for Poseidon, the gods so much partake of human nature that they are capable even of dying.

Peisthetairos then points out to Heracles that in fact Poseidon is trying to cheat him since he can in no wise inherit the wealth of Zeus. He is not γνήσιος[28], being the son of a mortal woman, and Athena rather is the heiress of Zeus. When Heracles wonders if he cannot in fact inherit Τὰ χρήματα νοθεῖα,[29] Peisthetairos recites a law of Solon against it.

Thus although human nature is a part of the life of the Olympians, both in the person of Heracles and in the attributes of the other gods, they do not adequately contain it within themselves. The heir to Zeus cannot be someone like Heracles who has been actually a human being, but is Athena, who springing from her father's head, has never left the circle of divinity. The Olympians have an unstable relation to humanity just as their relation to the natural is incomplete.

When Heracles discovers that he cannot be the heir of Zeus, he loses all concern for the Olympians, and looking to his breakfast, votes for giving *Basileia* to Peisthetairos. Poseidon cannot of course vote to undo that sovereignty to which he is so intimately connected and continues his opposition to the scheme. The Triballian, between whom and the Olympians there is no love lost, votes to hand over *Basileia;* and this, by majority vote, is the decision of the embassy.

The elements of the Olympian religion, as represented by Poseidon, Heracles and the Triballian have not been able to cohere,

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28. *Birds* 1650.
29. *Birds* 1655-1656.

and thus they appropriately must give up *Basileia,* or Sovereignty. If they were to keep the Sovereignty, they would have to have found a unity amongst the rational gods, the natural gods, and the human appropriation of both these. Since they cannot, *Basileia* passes to Peisthetairos, who has been seen to be capable of this.

His marriage to *Basileia* gives to Peisthetairos the objective form of that unity toward which he was moving in the scene of the three visitors. As the play ends it is celebrated with great splendour. It is compared to the marriage of Hera to Zeus, whose rule the present marriage displaces. Because in marrying *Basileia,* he is joined to the sovereignty over nature and human community, Peisthetairos is hailed as the highest of gods.

Thus the play ends with this apotheosis of human subjectivity. Only by marrying *Basileia* does Peisthetairos attain that freedom which he has been seeking throughout the play. He sought it first in his flight from Athens, and the assertion of his own desires against her objective life. At that point, he and his partner imagine that emigration will satisfy them. Yet so wilful are they both, that no actual city could contain them or make them happy.

So Peisthetairos hit upon his scheme of a universal city of the birds that can dominate both gods and men. He joins his strong individuality to these nature powers. He does not disregard the universe as his education had presented it to him in the Olympian religion; he does not, for example, grow doubtful about the existence of the Olympians. He instead inverts that universe by giving priority to the natural over the rational. In accord with this, he develops the nature religion of the birds, a cosmogony appropriate to it, and a city that follows its principles.

This aspect of his career lasts until the scene of the three visitors. There, as has been seen above, his views undergo a considerable change, as he develops a city in which the rational and political have priority. This represents in one way, his return to the Olympian order.

Yet the action does not end with his renewed obedience to the Olympian gods. Rather, because he has a better grasp of the elements of the religion than do the gods, he deprives Zeus of *Basileia* and is himself wed to her. He thereby gains the objective dominion over nature and the human city. He has experienced all the elements of that dominion before, dividedly; now he has them as they are in their unity. He can desire nothing more, and his journey is complete.

If one ask therefore what the attitude of the play is to human individuality or a free subjectivity, the answer can be of no simple kind. On the one hand, the play ends with the hero's displacing

the gods and being hailed as highest of gods. On the other, this is not simply dependent on his own inner life, but also on his coming into possession of *Basileia*.

If the well-being of Peisthetairos depends on *Basileia*, the play is in one way the complete vindication of *polissittlichkeit* and the overthrow of Peisthetairos' subjectivity. Try as he might, he must acknowledge what lies in her as true and essential to him. Yet in another way, he does not discover her in the lived realities of *polis*-life. He marries her as she is in her eternal splendour; she sums up what is essential about that life rather than being that life itself. Thus, she exists for the thought of Peisthetairos; the play would therefore be an affirmation of his thinking individuality.

Yet the play does not altogether vindicate this either. Peisthetairos' capacity for thought has also led him astray. Because of it, he fled Athens and was caught in the absurdities of the bird religion. He fell into a self-seeking and natural individuality, which the action of the play showed to be a thoroughly self-contradictory affair.

Peisthetairos could not, however, have come to know of, and to marry, *Basileia* without this excursion into nature-worship. Only his experience of it and its absurdities made him amenable to knowing the essence of the Olympian religion. Had he not fled Athens, he would have lived the life of the *polis* without understanding it.

Thus his capacity for thinking is vindicated only in so far as he arrives at the knowledge and possession of *Basileia*. It has been seen as negative in its propensity for overturning the City and its religion. However, in so far as these can be known only by him who leaves them, they are also seen to suffer a grave limitation. So neither thought in itself nor the institutions and religion of the city are vindicated in any absolute way. Human thought receives its apotheosis in so far as it knows its objective basis in *Basileia;* the institutions of the city are vindicated not as they have appeared in their everyday reality but as they are essentially and eternally present in her.

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