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Dionysos in Old Comedy. Staging of Experiments on Myth and Cult

1 Dionysos and the Festive Occasion

Dionysos is a very vivid and creative god who defies simple definitions.¹ It is known that he encompasses polar oppositions. Thus we can read already on the Orphic bone tablets in Olbia: ΒΙΟΣ ΘΑΝΑΤΟΣ ΒΙΟΣ ('life–death–life'), ΕΙΡΗΝΗ ΠΟΛΕΜΟΣ ('peace–war'), ΑΛΗΘΕΙΑ ΨΕΥΔΟΣ ('truth–lie').² These dichotomies do not suffice – further antitheses between which he oscillates are: man–woman, god–man/animal, *polis*–countryside, inside–outside, abroad–home, Greek–Barbarian, civilization–nature, cosmos–chaos, idyll–violence, happiness–suffering, laughing–agony/destruction, tranquility–*mania*, and festivity–ecstasy.

Yet Dionysos means neither pure antithesis nor the frequently cited *coincidentia oppositorum*. Rather, both sides touch upon and refer to each other in a counterbalancing tension, and both poles are to be understood as energetic life forces that are in permanent exchange and in a dynamic reciprocation. Therefore, the series of oppositions are not abstract terms but are to be experienced in cult and myth. Accordingly, Bacchus is not only the violent, ecstatic, and destructive power, but also a central city-god who stabilizes the order of society. Scenarios of inversion are located basically in myth, while phenomena of group cohesion such as festivity, enjoyment, and happiness are based in cult. Moreover, Dionysos is hardly the 'Other' *per se*. However, he epitomizes difference more than any other Greek deity.

Furthermore, Dionysos is a god in permanent change and exposes others also to transformations that are to be seen in the whole range of categorical oppositions.³ His main features and areas of responsibility are: a) wine and inebriation; b) wild nature and animality; c) madness and ecstasy; d) the underworld and death; and initiations can open perspectives on a blessed afterlife; e) Eros and love; f) dance, music, and performance; g) mask and costume; h) fiction, imagination, vision, miracle, epiphany, and presence.⁴ Due to just the last items f) to h),

1 For the role of Dionysos in all three dramatic genres, see Bierl 2011a from where I expanded the part on comedy. I thank Alberto Bernabé for the kind invitation to present my views as a keynote at the conference in Madrid.

2 *OF* 463–465.

3 Bierl 1991, 13–20 and 227 (Appendix 1).

4 Henrichs 1982, esp. 139; Henrichs 1996, esp. 479; Henrichs 2008, esp. 23.

he is regarded as the god of theater. The θεά of a procession – the ‘show’ – that discharges energy manifesting itself in music, noise, and wild corporeal movements through signs of exception and phallic demonstration,⁵ becomes a θέατρον, into which ‘the coming god’ arrives and has his epiphany.⁶ Dionysos is a θεατής, partly actor and even leader of his entourage of female maenads and male satyrs.

Moreover, the choral *thiasos* is mirrored in the actual dramatic χορός which by reenactment the singers do reactualize. The chorus of citizens dancing for Dionysos represents a link to the spectators who thus become participants. Through reciprocal, oscillating fluctuations between inside and outside, cult and myth, the theater production becomes a comprehensive multimedia performance in the sign of Dionysos.⁷ In addition, drama is embedded in a ritual frame of festivals that are rigorously regulated by the *polis* or the *demos* (such as City Dionysia, Lenaea, Rural Dionysia). The ritual and performative framing is partially reflected in the events on stage. It is well known that a simple ritual performance is reinforced by self-references to its own execution.⁸

2 Origins and Reflections on Genre

Even an enlightened philosopher like Aristotle locates the origins of comedy in the Dionysiac cult.⁹ In the fourth chapter of his *Poetics* (1449a 9–24), he declares that before the generic development there was a common prototype called ‘the satyric’ (*satyrikon*) – a clearly Dionysiac and ludic performance in choral form from where, by means of improvisation, further small comic scenes of actors evolved. Comedy stems from exuberant choral processions, the *komoí*, and from phallic songs. The *phallos* is again a typical Dionysian feature symbolizing the vitality of the god. Huge *phalloi* and choral songs around them belong to many Bacchic festivals and have their place even in the late and very politicized Dionysia.

5 On the Dionysian occasion as festivals of exception, see Hoffman 1989; Aronen 1992; des Bouvrie 1993.

6 See Otto 1933, esp. 74–80; on Dionysos’ particular presence and tendency to show himself in an epiphany, see Henrichs 2008, 19. On the epiphanic character of the *parodos* of the *Bacchae* in the form of a procession, see now Bierl 2011b.

7 On drama in general, see Bierl 1991; Bierl 2001 (Engl. Bierl 2009a); Bierl 2011b.

8 Bierl 2001, 37–64 (Engl. Bierl 2009a, 24–47).

9 On the emergence of drama from ritual precursors, see now Csapo/Miller 2007.

In an early phase, when ritual and myth are still the dominant media in a traditional society, and mimetic production relies entirely on orality, the occasional frame can almost coincide with the genre.¹⁰ Or, in the felicitous words of Gregory Nagy: ‘the occasion is the genre.’¹¹ Therefore, the festive framing and the sequence of ritual actions are very significant.

All Dionysian festivals of exception are distinguished by phallic processions, wine, ivy, ecstasy, wild dance, grotesque, fantastic cross-dressing, and masks through the enactment of mythic satyrs and maenads. Moreover, many elements of the *δρώμενα* and *λεγόμενα* refer to the inversion of the order and the entrance into a temporary topsy-turvy world of liminality. Only after the festival where the comic plays as ludic excrescences are performed – with their plots of inversion and distortion mirroring these features – does one return to the normal perspective of everyday life.

When the ritual frame becomes fragile under the influence of a growing literacy and fictionalization, and when the *polis* lays over it forms of political self-expression, do stricter rules of genre begin to be established.¹² Thus, in the same context of the City Dionysia, tragedy, satyr-play, and comedy evolve from the *satyrikon*. Moreover, although the City Dionysia featuring many elements of self-representation are a late product of Peisistratus and his sons, still the same ritual elements are integrated into the new *polis*-festival. Despite all subversive tendencies, Dionysos as a central *polis*-god himself also encompasses aspects of political cohesion, self-expression, and hymn-like praise that are incorporated in the new dynamic form of ritual which, in archaic and classical times, can never be separated from the political. This affirmative tendency finds its expressions more in tragedy and in the dithyrambs that dominate the competitions in the beginning after 534 BCE than in comedy.¹³ Yet the entire dramatic ensemble, the tragic trilogy with the following satyr-play and the latecomer comedy, whose introduction creates a kind of compensation for the earlier tendencies of gravity and seriousness, has to be seen as a unity which comprehends the two sides of the god.

After the institution of the satyr-play around 500 BCE, comedy is integrated into the official *agon* of the City Dionysia as late as in 487/86 BCE, and even only around 442/41 BCE into the Lenaea. That is the reason why the genuine connection with rural festivals including all their carnivalesque and aischrological elements has been maintained as the performative frame. Obviously the demo-

10 See Nagy 1990a, 9 and 362–363 and Nagy 1994/95, esp. 11–14.

11 Nagy 1990a, 362 and Nagy 1994/95, 13.

12 See Nagy 1990a, 9, 362 n. 127 and Nagy 1994/95.

13 For the political implications of Dionysos in tragedy, see Bierl 1991, 45–110.

cratic *polis* tried to compensate for the destabilization of the original interrelation between occasion and genre and established a link to the agrarian side of the demes with such laughable and aggressive performances. The new comic chorus doubles the number of twelve applicable for the tetralogy (three tragedies plus satyr-play).

In a functional definition of genre, Angelo Brelich tried to combine the quintessentially Dionysian with comedy and tragedy. In line with the Dionysian tendency of inversion, tragedy perverts the perspective in an upward direction into the heroic and sublime. On the contrary, by strategies of laughter, mockery, aischrology, obscenity, and phallic rites, comedy, according to Brelich, distorts the perspective into the base and sub-human, that is into the 'ugly' (Arist. *Po.* 1449a 32–37). By means of such inversions of the normal order, citizens in the theater have a chance to become aware of their norms and values.¹⁴

3 Dionysos and Carnavalesque Exceptionality

As I said, Old Comedy is a ludic performance which developed from excrescences of *komoï* and phallic processions or songs at the occasion of Dionysiac festivals, of which we possess later reflections in the phallic songs of Semos (fr. 851 *PMG*).¹⁵ As far as comedy is concerned, the ritual frame crosses over to the content of the plays, as we will see. Isolde Stark, however, has put forward a new opinion which is mostly shaped by social-history and not by literary or cultural concerns. She claims that Old Comedy has nothing to do with Dionysos and with ritual at all,¹⁶ rather the comic actors are ἄτιμοι, outcasts and beggars without civic rights, who in their 'song to the *komos*' without any chorus banter with and in front of the aristocratic and higher strata of society. This is an interesting but completely single voice which does not comply with the Dionysian contents of the extant texts and fragments of Old Comedy.¹⁷ Stark's detached views stand also in contrast to the *communis opinio* which is normally based on theories of origins and not on an analysis of the comedies themselves.

¹⁴ See Brelich 1975, esp. 112. On the functional and pragmatic determination of comedy as a genre, see Bierl 2002a.

¹⁵ Bierl 2001, 300–361 (Engl. Bierl 2009a, 267–325).

¹⁶ Stark 2004, esp. 29–30. The question of origin is nearly impossible to resolve. On account of the synchronic status of Old Comedy, which is full of Dionysian elements, one can, of course, pose diachronic conjectures as well.

¹⁷ Stark 2004, *passim*. For 'song to the *komos*,' see *ibid.* 79. For her argument that the chorus 'genetically' did not belong to Old Comedy, see *ibid.* 99, and 73–102.

I contend that Old Comedy celebrates the miraculous and bizarre inversion of all norms by lapsing back into fantastic, primordial stages of civilization. Only because of a relatively late incorporation into the theatrical *agon* could such a comic performance maintain its ritual and traditional character much longer.¹⁸ The function of the comic genre consists in creating potential views that are complementary to the actual world from the low and inverted perspective of the ‘Other,’ ugly and obscene, by comically leaping back¹⁹ into atavistic times.²⁰ The ambivalent comic hero acting in a fantastic and grotesque comic body-mask²¹ starts a journey into an otherworld which is still comically related to the real world. From this temporal and spatial realm of difference, he draws power and capacities of healing states of deficiency.²² The ‘parabatic’ transparency toward the ritual frame, to the dimension of the celebrating and acting citizens, is ubiquitous, not only on the choral level, but also on the level of the actors. There is not such a thing as illusion or ‘suspense of disbelief.’²³ And in such fantastic experiments, the comic figures can act against the laws of probability and the usual limits of time and space. In the following discussion I argue that Old Comedy – as well as its basic god Dionysos – is based on the carnivalesque. Thus, the occasion of exceptional Dionysian festivals and the content of many comedies interpenetrate.

The only modern study by Xavier Riu dedicated to the Dionysian, not to Dionysos, seems to be rather one-sided and is derived from the *Bacchae*.²⁴ Accordingly, Riu constructs the Dionysian essence of the comic genre by using the work of Jean-Pierre Vernant and mixing it with a fixed pattern of actions as developed by Francis M. Cornford.²⁵ Through the integration of Dionysos as the ‘Other’ into the *polis*, the dissolution of order would be acted out, as Riu main-

18 See Bierl 2001, 29–30 (Engl. Bierl 2009a, 17–18). The fact of the late integration of comedy into the contest of the Lenaea (442/41 BCE) does not automatically indicate, as Stark 2004, 48 and 101 believes, that comedy originally had nothing to do with Dionysos (see *ibid.* 11–65, esp. 29–30).

19 See Lohr 1986, 63–68.

20 On the functional and complementary understanding of comedy, which operates with an idea of ‘back to the roots,’ see Münz 1998, 78, 101, 109, 118, 134–136, 151–152 and 228–229. See now also Bierl 2009b, 19–20.

21 See Münz 1998, 109, 120, 132 and 275–279.

22 On these explanations, see also Bierl 2002b, 172–173 and Bierl 2009b, 19–25.

23 Bierl 2001, 65, 69–70, 74, 87, 92, 104–105, 111, 113, 178, 214, 217, 364, 368, 371, 374 (Engl. Bierl 2009a, 48, 51–53, 56, 67, 72, 82–83, 88–89, 91, 152, 186, 189, 329, 333, 335, 338).

24 Riu 1999.

25 See Cornford 1914.

tains.²⁶ However, the Dionysiac element, particularly in comedy, represents not only a negative scenario of destabilization and destruction but also positive values that help to establish the cohesion of the *polis* and its citizens.²⁷

Without a doubt, besides all of its playful festivity, the laughter of comedy is aggressive as well. And through his negative dimension, Dionysos is also linked to violence, war, and aggression. Furthermore, the comic genre is characterized by bawdy sexuality, grotesque corporeality, ribald derision, cross-dressing, ὀνομαστί κωμωδεῖν, scatology, *tothasmos*, iambic directness, inebriety, ecstasy, wild and animalistic behavior, archaic-atavistic chaos, scenarios of the under- and otherworld, *phalloi*, frolicking dance, masks covering the whole body with distorting features, and much more. The *iambos* is based on rites of festivals of exception in honor of Demeter and Dionysos as well. On the positive side of the comic Dionysian spectrum are rural idylls, nature, utopias of a golden age, food, sacrifice, wine, festivity, symposium, cheerfulness, blooming vegetation, opulent agriculture, commerce, happy endings, marriage, sex and eroticism, peace and health, choral dance, and beautiful music. In Old Comedy, one side always threatens to collapse into its opposite. Accordingly, the idyllic utopia is bound to become a ‘*dystopia*,’ with all the Dionysian signs. Comedy thus establishes itself in the oscillating and transformative play of these perspectives. The Dionysian κῶμος, where the citizens reactualize the state of the ‘Betwixt and Between’ characteristic of the ephebes, is translated to κωμωδία. In the wild group, the young man does away with all civic norms by beating up everyone, raping, excessively drinking, brawling, and swarming in unrestrained ways.²⁸

In contrast to the ludic and cheerful manner of the satyr-play, where mostly the canonic versions of myth are parodied, Old Comedy can integrate all existing discourses in its specific modus. This applies most of all to all areas of the political life, such as daily politics, the juridical system, and the democratic process, but also to myth, ritual, cult, festivals, and oracles. In the same way, we should not forget science and literature, most of all the parallel genre of tragedy, which provides much material in form of παρατραγωδία. Everybody who possesses power and authority is mocked and grotesquely distorted, that is, politicians,

²⁶ See Seaford 1996 with the review by Bierl 1999 and Riu 1999 in its entirety with the review by Bierl 2002c.

²⁷ Bierl 1991, esp. 18–20, 45–110, esp. 49–54.

²⁸ Bierl 2001, 312–313, 318 n. 48, 341 n. 105, 358 n. 140 (Engl. Bierl 2009a, 278–279, 284 n. 48, 306 n. 105, 322 n. 140).

military commanders, judges, priests, doctors, poets, wise men, intellectuals, and philosophers. Even gods can be subjected to this comic practice.²⁹

4 Dionysos on Stage

For our subject the grotesque treatment of Dionysos in *Frogs* is of particular interest. In this comedy, the political and meta-theatrical implications of Dionysos could be focused very well.³⁰ Here, Dionysos acts more as god of the Athenian cult than of myth. Accordingly, he is associated with the mysteries of Eleusis (*Ra.* 312–459), where as Dionysos-Iacchus he plays an important role, besides Demeter and Persephone,³¹ and furthermore with his Dionysiac cult place ἐν Λίμναις (*Ra.* 216–217, 234), with the Bacchic Anthesteria (*Ra.* 209–220) and the Lenaea.³² Besides his function as god of theater and the *polis*, he is identified as god of wine as well.³³ In *Frogs* Dionysos plays the comic role of the tomfool or βωμολόχος³⁴ – one could almost think he is not a god at all. In the first part in particular he has degenerated into a human being with all shortcomings, who gets his knickers in a twist. Pascal indignantly calls Dionysos ‘un dio falso e bugiardo,’³⁵ that is, a god who has lost all his divine attributes.³⁶ Since an early contribution by Charles Segal, scholars have tried to understand the comedy as a process in which the god

29 Stark 2004, *passim* does not believe this and argues that the comic laughter targets only the comic actors as social outcasts. According to her, mockery of the gods is impossibly (87, 105, 128). Even in the case of the *Dionysalexandros*, she advocates that Dionysos himself was not derided (320). For another view on the ὀνομαστί κωμωδεῖν, which emphasizes its ambivalence and thus also challenges the *communis opinio*, see Bierl 2002b.

30 Bierl 1991, 27–44.

31 See Graf 1974, 43 and 46–69.

32 Tierney 1934/1935 even makes the case that in the *parodos* of the *Frogs*, it is not the procession of Eleusis that is traced, but rather it is related to parts of the Lenaeian festival. With the reference to the Eleusinian mysteries, the Lenaeian festival could be at least implicitly involved, since it was closely related to Eleusis; see Deubner 1932, 125.

33 ... ἐγὼ μὲν ὦν Διόνυσος, υἱὸς Στραμνίου (*Ra.* 22). See also *Frogs* 218–220, 297, 740, 1150.

34 Segal 1961, 214–215 stresses that Dionysos not only appears as a clown, as Cornford 1914, 179 wishes to see him exclusively, but that he also issues well-balanced literary judgments.

35 Pascal 1911, 33; see also 29–33.

36 Contra Lapalus 1934. Pascal’s thesis (1911, 45–48) that Aristophanes reduced the god to a vulgar common-citizen because of his alleged hostility toward the wild, Bacchic rites is obviously influenced by the former discussion of the *Bacchae*, in which (as is well known) the palinodists were opposed to the anti-palinodists. See Bierl 1991, 177–178 and the palinodistic interpretation of the *Bacchae* by Pascal 1911, 34–44.

gradually finds his way back to his former identity.³⁷ Most of all, the *Frogs* represents the characteristic journey into the underworld on stage, here the underworld. Through his connection with death and mystery-concepts in the beyond, Dionysos is predestined to go this way. As the god of theater, he desires to travel to Hades because he has developed a very private *μυσία* (*Ra.* 103) for the sophistic poet Euripides and wants to bring him back onto earth after his death. To carry out his plans, Dionysos stages a private theater which, for the audience, has traits of a hubbub anti-theater. In order to gain access to the underworld, he concocts the idea of putting on the mask and identity of his brother Heracles, who has already survived such a *κατάβασις εἰς Αἴδου* as his last and twelfth adventure. By this deed, for which he first needed an initiation, he fulfilled the horrible assignment from Eurystheus to bring up the hellhound Cerberus from Hades.³⁸ After having met his grotesque brother, Dionysos obtains initiatory information from him. Thus his way is sketched in form of an Orphic-Bacchic underworld topography.³⁹ He descends from his sanctuary at the swamps, from where the souls and *Keres* return for one day at the Anthesteria.

Through the motif of the dirty swamp and the frogs, who live there and confront him in a hostile and aggressive way (*Ra.* 209–267), Aristophanes processes Orphic conceptions about morally evil and condemned persons in the underworld. The croaking and violent exchange is transformed to a comastic *agon*, in which one part wants to hoot down the other in an aggressive and scatological way. Thus the generic occasion, function, and origins are reenacted on the comic stage. Then, the threshold to death is marked by other monsters like Empusa (*Ra.* 285–305), too. After the successful passage to Hades, Dionysos reaches the positive, other side of Hades, the realm of the Eleusinian initiates who, as the main chorus, cheer in the afterworld. The trip through the underworld is distinguished by stops like the ones in a procession. Their positive and negative features are acted out in dialogues or choral scenes. The entire play, especially the first part with its slapstick scenes until the *agon*, is characterized by the problematization of the *μεταβολή*, the permanent transformation and the oscillation between different antithetic states. Therefore, the audience is confronted with an ongoing change between extreme conditions. This movement alone is characteristic of Dionysos himself.

³⁷ See Segal 1961 and among others Bierl 1991, 27–44.

³⁸ For this labor, Hercules required an initiation into a mystery cult; see E. *HF* 613 τὰ μυστῶν δ' ὄργι' εὐτύχησ' ἰδῶν. In this quotation, however, it is not the mysteries in Eleusis, but rather the so-called Lesser mysteries in Agrae that are meant; one of their main duties consisted especially in the purification of a blood guilt.

³⁹ On the whole subject, see Bowie 1993, 228–253; Lada-Richards 1999, esp. 45–122.

On this foil the famous contest between the tragedians, where Dionysos as theater god suddenly presides, can be interpreted as an exchange of blows between chthonic monsters and dead heroes. By absurdly reciprocating complementary and interdependent concepts, Aeschylus and Euripides act out the oscillation between opposing conditions. The play culminates in the abstruse decision that in reality is not a decision at all. At the very end, by bringing up Aeschylus Dionysos inverts even his original idea completely.

A similarly incongruent overlap of two figures takes place also in Cratinus' *Dionysalexandros* (PCG IV fr. 39–51 K.-A.), most likely performed at the Lenaea in 430 BCE. According to the *argumentum* in *P. Oxy.* 663, Dionysos plays the role of Paris who, according to his nature, decides in favor of Aphrodite and eroticism in the famous mythical judgment on Mount Ida. Therefore, he abducts Helen and celebrates the wedding. When the Achaeans arrive in Troy to take revenge, Dionysos behaves like a coward again. He hides and becomes invisible by transformation into a ram, a typical Dionysian sacrificial animal. Now the true Paris-Alexander arrives whose role has been occupied by Dionysos and detects him. The Trojan prince feels pity for Helen and keeps her as wife. Furthermore, he sends Dionysos home to Greece together with his chorus of satyrs.⁴⁰ In addition Dionysos is blended with layers of Pericles. In reality the ridiculous behavior aims at the mighty general who has overridden the *demos* in a tyrannical way. Most of all, his inglorious politics that was distinguished by love affairs and cautious maneuvering at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War are mocked. Contrary to tragedy, Dionysos appears in many other plays on the comic stage and is wholeheartedly derided. Like in these famous cases of Cratinus and Aristophanes, the comic Dionysos follows always a certain typology: he is a debauched, gluttonous, rather simple-minded braggart, whose boasting words turn out to be pure lies in view of his cowardice. Thus, Dionysos seems to have acted as a comic character of this type in Eupolis' *Taxiarchoi* (PCG V fr. 268–285 K.-A.), in Plato's *Adonis* (PCG VII fr. 1–8 K.-A.), and in Ameipsias' *Apokottabizontes* (PCG II fr. 1–5 K.-A.) as well.⁴¹

40 On the quality of this play as a satyr-play, see most recently Bakola 2005 and Bakola 2010, 81–102. According to her, the satyrs provide the main chorus, as in some other comedies.

41 We know less about the following comedies – yet one can speculate that here, too, Dionysos embodied a similar character type – entitled: Magnes' *Dionysos* (PCG V fr. 1–2 K.-A.); Crates' (II) *Dionysos* (PCG IV test. 1 K.-A.); Aristomenes' *Dionysos asketes* (PCG II fr. 11–13 K.-A.); Aristophanes' *Dionysos nauagos* (PCG III.2 fr. 277 K.-A.). From fr. 75 (PCG III.2 K.-A.) we can conclude that Dionysos also appeared in Aristophanes' *Babylonians*, though here as a judge over Athenian citizens.

5 Dionysian Traits in Comic Heroes, the Blend of *Personae*, and the Potpourri of Mythic and Ritual Elements

Many other comic heroes and figures partially overlap with Dionysos, too. For example, the winegrower Trygaeus, Philocleon, Dicaeopolis, and the tragedian Agathon in the *Thesmophoriazusae* partially coincide with the god of theater. Trygaeus' grotesque dung beetle, which serves as his aircraft into the Olympian heaven, is by homonymy associated with the *kantharos*, the specifically Dionysian wine vessel.⁴²

In the *Achamians*, Dicaeopolis is interwoven with the god of comedy through set pieces of Dionysian rituals in a bizarre and composite manner. By way of an Eleusinian priest, the hero procures the peace-wine, the concretization of the *σπονδαί*, and is thus able to install a private peace treaty for himself. The obligatory journey runs from the city to the *demos*, parallel to the phallic procession of the Rural Dionysia performed on stage. In Acharnae, the hero establishes a dishonest market. At the same time, the direction of his journey is toward the world of ghosts of the Anthesteria. The phallic song (*Ach.* 241–279) as monodic pseudo-choral song reenacts the origins of comedy. Moreover, it symbolically expresses the isolation from the collective of the citizens in the city.⁴³ The hero opposes the aggressive chorus of Acharnian charburners, who embody a sort of black primordial people⁴⁴ and hostile ghosts. For this confrontation he partially acts in the *persona* of Telephus. In a rhetorical and theatrical *mimesis*, he puts his head on the block. After borrowing the beggar's outfit from Euripides, he plays the famous king of Mysia who, like Dionysos, is a foreigner as well as Greek, and through this role-playing he can win them on his side. Furthermore, the Trojan War, the injury and healing as well as the myth of Orestes are blended into the play: according to the epic cycle, the Greek-descended king of Mysia is wounded by Achilles, who believes that he has landed in Troy. It is prophesied to the wounded Telephus that only the one who inflicted the wound on him can heal him. Therefore, Telephus finally travels to Argos; clothed in beggar's garments,

⁴² See Elderkin 1924, 49–75; he sees Trygaeus as a comic copy of Dionysos *Protrygaios*; on the festival of the Protrygaia, celebrated before the grape harvest, the arrival of the god Bacchus is symbolically solemnized through the simulation of the process of the vine-ripening. On this subject, see Kany 1988. On Dionysian themes in Old Comedy and *Peace*, see also Reckford 1987, esp. 3–45. On Trygaeus in *Peace*, see Bierl 2009b, 26–32.

⁴³ Bierl 2001, 350–361 (Engl. Bierl 2009a, 314–325).

⁴⁴ Nagy 1990b, 151 n. 30.

he pretends to be an alleged enemy of Telephus, and with a brilliant speech, he defends himself and the Trojans allied with him. In distress, he then takes the baby Orestes as a hostage and threatens him at the altar with a sword, as Dicaeopolis threatens the basket of coal (Ar. *Ach.* 325–334), to extort help from Achilles. Through his healing, Telephus becomes a betrayer of his homeland in Asia Minor, since he now promises to lead the Greeks to Troy in a counter-maneuver.⁴⁵ In the characteristic manner of the genre, there is neither a continuous action as illusion which runs according to the rules of probability nor a ‘suspension of disbelief’ nor do act figures with a fixed personality, but in the typically Dionysian mode, they oscillate between different performative roles or *personae* – even the poet can appropriate one of them.⁴⁶ In the end, Lamachus, the general injured on his leg and marked as a bellicose monster, is acted out as a comic counter-image of Dicaeopolis, who celebrates the Dionysian Anthesteria as a symbol of the newly established peace with an abundance of wine and sex. Thus the perspective shifts again from the Rural Dionysia and the demes back to the city and the central festival. The hero is announced as the winner of the Choes, the climax of the carnivalesque inversion. On that account, he reenacts the eerie drinking in isolation for which Orestes provides the mythical model. Simultaneously he is assimilated to Dionysos himself, to some degree, who arrives at his temple in the swamps and celebrates marriage with Basilinna – on the comic level, this is conveyed through erotic adventures with hetaeras. Finally, as already mentioned, Lamachus returns from his military operation, but now he is overlaid himself with traits of Telephus. Both antagonists, who emblematically embody war and peace, confront each other in a direct, corporeal, and performative way. As Telephus was punished by Dionysos because he had neglected his cult in Mysia by being caught in a vine-branch, stumbling and thus being wounded on his leg by Achilles, in the same way the general becomes injured at a pale while jumping over a ditch, and he enters limping. Dicaeopolis, on the contrary, has won a wineskin as the prize of *askoliasmos*, a cheerful competition of hopping on a wineskin. The contrast of antagonists is staged in a Dionysian fashion as an oscillating kaleidoscope of oppositions entangling with each other and permanently popping up in new constellations. To some degree, Lamachus and Dicaeopolis emblemize Hades and Dionysos as well as Ares and Dionysos.⁴⁷ Yet, as we have noticed above, Dionysos alone encompasses the oppositions of death and life as well as war and peace. Moreover, many Dionysian

45 See Foley 1988; Bowie 1993, 18–44; Möllendorff 2002, 66–70.

46 See also Slater 2002, 42–67.

47 On the mutually overlapping, antithetical pair of Ares and Dionysos, see Bierl 1991, 155–156 in regards to E. *Ph.* 784–800.

festivals and single ritual elements as well as myths provide the Bacchic background of an aesthetic and elaborate theatrical play in a strange pastiche.⁴⁸ The comic-parodic juxtaposition and blending offers the assembled *polis* complementary perspectives on public life in a democracy where the single citizen is permanently drawn between liberty, his own drives, and the constraints of society.

6 The Anthesteria as the Dionysian Master-festival in Comedy, and *Plutus*

The Anthesteria, the Dionysian festival of exception with its temporary dissolution of normal order,⁴⁹ can actually account for a kind of free model for a considerable number of Aristophanes' plays. There, as in other festivals of exception, the cult of the Olympian gods is temporarily suspended, their temples are closed and sacrifices interrupted. On the aetiological level of the accompanying myths, the present Olympian gods are often ousted by an older divine generation. The world returns to its origins, and primordial chaos replaces the present order of culture and human civilization. All of its present norms and values are temporarily set aside. Barbarian primitive peoples that once ruled over Athenian soil come back to restore their power. In the ritual, masked groups of wild men, especially theriomorphic satyrs and similar figures rampage in the streets throughout the city. These groups, sometimes also associated with the returning ghosts of ancestors, act out all the wildness in contrast to the civilized behavior of historical Athens. They laugh, break all sorts of taboos, make fun of the people, dance in a violent manner, and go around begging, abusing, and blessing. These states of return to the past are furthermore associated with a utopian way of life, in which plants and food grow automatically, men do not have to work, and people live in peace and tranquility. Cronus seems to have come back from his subterranean recesses to replace Zeus and deprive him of his power. All hierarchies of the social order become invalid, slaves are freed, and their masters have to serve them. In all these mytho-ritual expressions of utopia there lies a deep ambivalence: 'ou-topia' ('no-place') becomes ambiguous, a place between 'eu-topia' ('good-place') and 'dys-topia' ('place of distortion'). Finally, people drive these masked bands out of the city. Chaos again gives way to normality. In this

⁴⁸ On the pastiche of Dionysian festivals and rites, see Habash 1995. See also Fisher 1993.

⁴⁹ See Burkert 1983, 213–247 and Burkert 1985, 237–242, who interprets the Anthesteria as a new year's festival. For the Anthesteria as a festival of exception, see Auffarth 1991, 202–276; for an analysis in an unpretentious way, see Parker 2005, 290–316.

transition from total confusion to order, men reenact the origins of civilization. The ritual process is reinforced by performing myths of cosmogony and by telling how the hierarchical system of beasts, men, and gods developed. By ritually falling back into states of wildness and disorder, the Greeks and other peoples question their values and norms and experiment in a playful way with the limits and pragmatics of their cultural system.

As we have seen, the allusions to the Anthesteria become explicit in the *Acharnians*, and the festival is also decisive for the understanding of the *Birds*. There are several references to the χύτροι, and the plot is determined by the sacrificial strike through which Zeus and the Olympians are forced to abdication; in the end, a sacred marriage is celebrated with Basilinna.⁵⁰ Yet the basic structure is also found in *Peace* where the Olympian gods have to withdraw, Eirene is installed (ἴδρυσις), and a sacred marriage seals again the events. A similar pattern in the plot also manifests itself in the *Knights* (myth of succession; *agon* of the old order with a new order; rejuvenation of Demos and wondrous return to the old), in the *Clouds* (deposition of Zeus; conflict between the old and new religion), in the *Wasps* (the conflict between father and son corresponds to the battle of old against young; additionally, the generational conflict is accompanied by allusions to the divine generations) and in the *Frogs*. In this play the *agon* between the old poet Aeschylus and the new poet Euripides is strengthened with allusions from the context of the conflict of the divine generations. Moreover, Dionysos, in his sanctuary ἐν λίμναις, descends into the underworld and brings the old, chaotic power of Aeschylus back to the earth.⁵¹

On this foil, the allusions to the Anthesteria become particularly constitutive of *Plutus*. In this late play on the verge to Middle and New Comedy, I see a correlation between the character of Carion, his outstanding role as a slave in this play, and the attested freedom of the slaves during this festival of license. Moreover, the name Carion might be significant at the Anthesteria if we take into account the proverbial saying θύραζε Κάρεις, οὐκέτ' Ἀνθεστήρια at the end of this festival. In my opinion, Carion is a representative of the so-called Carians, a primordial, barbarian people who lived in Attica before Athenians' settlements. Slaves, barbarian primitive forefathers, and even ancestral ghosts (Κῆρες as a later variant) become structurally equivalent meanings for Carion, representing the 'Other' for the Athenian here and now. Thus, Carion is a member of this barbarian *Urvolk* which ritual reenacts in masked wild beings rambling in the streets of Athens. Carion represents the core of *Plutus*' comic side; somehow he

⁵⁰ See Craik 1987 and Auffarth 1994.

⁵¹ On the subject of old and new, with particular reference to *Clouds*, see Bierl 2004.

appears like a survivor of the former comic hero. Through Carion, Aristophanes succeeds in remaining in Old Comedy because he is the only character of this play who fulfills the expectation of the crude, archaic humor of the ritually based genre. With this in mind, we understand why he appears so notoriously odd and amusing: the Carian attribute is connected with wine, death, and confusion. This applies for Carion, too, and, to some degree, he acts like a Dionysian satyr. The ecstatic *parodos*, which critics have mostly ignored because of its indecent content, is a masterpiece of comic choral song recalling the Aristophanic tradition: the Odyssean setting recalls a primordial past before the introduction of quintessential elements of culture. Carion, in the role of Polyphemus, acts out the introduction of wine, the event that the Anthesteria ritually reenact every year. The whole scenario is a mirror of the ambivalent utopia that is going to be reestablished later on by Carion and his fellows as the return of *Ploutos/Plouton* (729). The mythic pair encompasses the ambiguity of the Cronian golden age, oscillating between the notion of wealth and plenty on the one side and death, chaos, and uncivilized status on the other.

In *Plutus*, the narrative functions further on the basis of the Anthesteria as a period of exception: Zeus and the Olympians are ousted by means of a sacrificial strike, translated into a capitalistic worldview. Zeus had established an effective system of hierarchy and sacrificial nutrition by reversing an evident and valid system of morality. Accordingly, he shuts off the just people from wealth in order to make them give cultic offerings because he realizes that only the morally good citizens would sacrifice anyway. By this rationale he achieves a permanent flow of sacrifices. In terms of the comic logic, sacrifice is equivalent to nourishment for the gods. Zeus had blinded Plutus, the incorporation and divine personification of wealth, because he was opposed to these mean politics. Aristophanes builds his story upon the proverbial blindness of wealth in archaic and classical literature and on the motive of the envy of Zeus, the so-called φθόνος θεῶν or Διός (*Pl.* 87–92), translated into action. Thus, the starting point is that reality, the just regime of Zeus, is by principle a world upside down, for it is unjust. Chremylus knows that through the subversion of this reality – i. e. the δίκαιοι become rich, the unjust poor – the unjust regime of Zeus can be ousted. By regaining his eyesight, Plutus can return to his original status, when he could gratify the good men with wealth. In the long run the entire population would become just and rich, because the unjust persons would have an incentive to change their immoral attitude in order to take a share in the common wealth. After all, this means a utopian return to a Cronian world before the dominion of Zeus when mankind led a peaceful life, in short, the return to the golden age, when men did not have to work for their living, but food was provided automatically. This utopian prospective is undercut by the negative signs that are associated with the primordial times before the

invention of civilization. The subversion of a perverted reality is after all nothing but a world upside down raised to the second power. The apparently better world installed by Carion and Chremylus under the domain of Plutus can turn out to be a nightmare. There are numerous signs ironically hinting at this hidden negative complex: I need only recall the speech of Penia, the personification of poverty. The participants of rituals of exception, just as the spectators of comedies, might have been glad when the period of chaotic instability would be over.⁵²

7 Dionysian Webs and Sign Patterns: The Outburst of Energy

On the other hand, the reference to the positively connoted cult of Dionysos often serves as an expression of special joy and merriment. Moreover, entire passages can be built upon Dionysian patterns. Wine, rural idyll, festivity, sexuality, and peace often serve as a counter-image of the everyday world that is distinguished by politics and military actions (see *Acharnians*, *Peace*). A whole flood of Dionysian signs seems to pervade the *Peace* in particular.⁵³

The *Wasps* broaches the issue of the eruption of Dionysiac energy in the form of dance and movement. In his maniacal love for the juridical system, Philocleon embodies an archaic and Dionysian component of social vitality which one cannot simply shut away, suppress, or reeducate. Therefore, all of his son's efforts to compensate him for the loss of public functions with a private introduction into the symposium are doomed to fail. In the end his true nature surfaces again. Completely drunken, Philocleon lashes about, offends all surrounding citizens, and takes the hetaeras for himself. Despite his old age, he reactualizes his ephebic phase and the uninhibited nature in the *komos*. He clubs down people, he goes whoring, mocks, and breaks all the boundaries of the norm. At the very end his indomitable, Dionysian energy explodes and breaks free on stage. It is acted out in a frenzied dancing contest against tragedians, the sons of Carcinus, the small 'crabs,' and typically comic animals. In his wild and whirling body movements, he becomes the embodiment of *Dinos*, the chaotic eddy of nature that engulfs everything. Retained Dionysian vitality thus erupts again in a fiercer way than

52 For a detailed analysis of *Plutus* on these premises, see Bierl 1994.

53 Elderkin 1924, 49–75 already viewed this similarly.

before the attempts at checking it.⁵⁴ A similar view on the Dionysian is often found in the satyr-play, as I have shown, for example, for the famous fragment of Pratinas.⁵⁵

8 Dionysos and Choral Dance in Comedy

Moreover, the comic chorus refers to their own actions in the orchestra in honor of the theater god and directly to Dionysos in a much more frequent and articulate way than in tragedy. In the pure song of choral dance in the *Thesmophoriazusae* (947–1000), the chorus refers only to their own cyclic movement without incorporating myths as exempla. At the end of the song, the comic chorus finally projects their activity on mythic Dionysos and his *thiasos* in the mountains. By the execution of the choral dance, Mnesilochus is approximated to the perspective of the women at the Thesmophoria who notionally reactualize their initiatory status when they were on the verge between maiden and women. At this point in the comic play, thus very similar to Dionysian songs in tragedy, the decisive change takes place, first to the female figures on the threshold to adulthood, then to the comic solution.⁵⁶

Last but not least, like in tragedy, the choral singers use Dionysos and his signs to shift from the fiction of the play into the performative and civic frame of Athens, and they like to evoke an idyllic atmosphere of Attica.⁵⁷ In the antistrophe of the *parodos* of *Clouds*, for example, the choral dancers in their role as dewy creatures praise the Attic fields that maintain the mystic view and where, as it happens in Eleusis, blessed people promenade in holy processions. Finally, they sing about their own festive occasion of the City Dionysia, where in springtime (March/April) the performative choral culture of dramatic competitions takes place – ἦρί τ' ἐπερχομένῳ Βρομία χάρις / εὐκελάδων τε χορῶν ἐρεθίσματα / καὶ μούσα βαρύβρομος αὐλῶν (*Nu.* 311–313). Typically, the outer and inner frames overlap in referencing their own performance, the choral dance in honor of Dionysos.

54 On Philocleon as Dionysian *ithyphallos*, see MacCary 1979; on the pathological *mania* of the hero, see Sidwell 1990. On further Dionysian motives, see Davies 1990.

55 Pratin. 708 *PMG*. Bierl 2006.

56 See Bierl 2001, 105–299 (Engl. Bierl 2009a, 83–265).

57 For tragedy see S. *OC* 668–683.

9 Conclusions

We have seen that the use of Dionysos and Dionysian signs in Old Comedy has a very wide range. Far from unabating individual voices who, in accordance with the famous οὐδέν πρὸς τὸν Διόνυσον (Zenobius 5.40; Suda ο 806), claim that drama, particularly tragedy and even comedy, has nothing to do with Dionysos,⁵⁸ I hope that I have shown that comedy has a lot to do with him – thus πολλὰ πρὸς τὸν Διόνυσον. It is rather futile to speculate about origins and possible Dionysian connections. What we can say, however, is that in the extant dramas Dionysos plays a pivotal role. It might be that other festivals of exception stand at the very beginning, or that different layers join and merge in the new occasion of Dionysos. Definitely central for comedy is Dionysos' exceptional status. The old function of festivals of exception that are often in the realm of Dionysos, Cronus, and Demeter is mirrored in the plays themselves. In Dionysos' occasion and range of significations, comedy puts utopian and fanciful experiments on stage. The exceptional occasion with breaches of norms, aggressive derision of individuals, obscenity, and mockery of the gods finds a parallel in the *iambos*. Many Greek gods mediate between two sides. Yet it is after all Dionysos who encompasses oppositions that refer to one another in a very pointed way. Since he is the god of theater, the dramatic authors anchor him in their plays and refer to him. Dionysos' fickle personality with all of his transformations makes him ideally suited to function as a perfect sign for playful inventions and meta-theatrical experiments. In comedy it is particularly his oscillating nature that is reflected in the characteristics of the genre. The parabolic openness, the fragmentation, the ludic experimentation, the lack of illusion, the multi-layered plot, the constitution of comic heroes as composite figures who unite different *personae*, and much more have a great deal to do with Dionysos.

As we have seen, in Old Comedy the god can appear and be ridiculed himself on stage, or the comic hero can consist of different Dionysian features or sign-ensembles, or the plot can be composed of several elements of Dionysian myths, rituals, or parts of festivals. The creative god is responsible for a poetics of patchwork and distortion, of assembling and reassembling fragmented parts, and for a parasitic and parodic drawing on authoritative discourses. Moreover, the god encompasses terrible aspects like violence, death, war, frenzy, and hubristic transgression as well as positive sides such as wine, sex, fun, food, peace, well-being, merriment, festivity, and laughter. Another Dionysian feature is the focus on the body and bodily functions, above all the phallic and the sexual. His ability

⁵⁸ See Scullion 2002; Stark 2004.

of mixing all existing signs together and his energetic potential are aptly illustrated by comic dance and play. All in all, comedy is deeply grounded in its god – without understanding him it is impossible to understand the genre.

Abbreviations

K.-A.: R. Kassel and C. Austin (eds.), *Poetae Comici Graeci*, I, II, III.2, IV, V, VI.2, VII, VIII, Berlin/New York 1983–2001 (= PCG).

n. s.: New Series.

OF: A. Bernabé (ed.), *Orphicorum et Orphicis similibus testimonia et fragmenta*, PEG, II.1–3, Leipzig/München 2004–2005; Berlin/New York 2007.

PCG: R. Kassel and C. Austin (eds.), *Poetae Comici Graeci*, I, II, III.2, IV, V, VI.2, VII, VIII, Berlin/New York 1983–2001 (= K.-A.).

PEG: A. Bernabé (ed.), *Poetae Epici Graeci*, I, II.1–3, Leipzig/Berlin/New York 1987–2007.

PMG: D. L. Page (ed.), *Poetae Melici Graeci*, Oxford 1962.

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