Nietzsche's Great Politics as Fantasy Politics of Dionysian Comedy

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ABSTRACT

I argue that Nietzsche's "great politics" is neither the ravings of an unhinged madman nor a serious political program. Instead, when he calls for the destruction of the House of Hohenzollern or tries to redate the calendar to year one, day one to correspond to the date of his revaluation of values, we are, as his readers, supposed to laugh, and we are supposed to laugh because his "great politics" is a form of "fantasy politics" that is part of a Dionysian comedy Nietzsche enacts in his 1888 works. Although his specific political proposals are ridiculous, the great politics of Nietzsche's Dionysian comedy is meant to liberate a kind of eros that can be associated with Aristophanes and was condemned by the likes of Plato (eros tyrannos) *and Augustine* (libido dominandi). *For this reason, the fantasy politics of Nietzsche's Dionysian comedy can have significant social and political implications.*

1. Introduction

"For when truth enters into a fight with the lies of millennia, we shall have upheavals, a convulsion of earthquakes, a moving of mountains and valley, the like of which has never been dreamed of. The concept of politics will have merged entirely with a war of spirits; all power structures of the old society will have been exploded—all of them are based on lies: there will be wars the like of which have never yet been seen on earth. It is only beginning with me that the earth knows *great politics*" (EH "Destiny": 1).[1] These words were penned by someone who was, at the time, a lonely and largely unread philologist on the verge of a mental collapse. Written today, they would likely put the author on a watchlist. However, we now read them as the words of arguably one of the greatest philosophers of the nineteenth century who has exercised a tremendous influence across the world. In retrospect, they can even seem prophetic, predicting the two world wars that would dominate the first half of the twentieth century. Nietzsche knew his philosophy was revolutionary, and some might claim that his prescience about his eventual influence only attests to his genius.

In this paper, I will argue that Nietzsche's "great politics" is neither the ravings of an unhinged madman nor a serious political program. Instead, when he calls for the destruction of the House of Hohenzollern or tries to redate the calendar to year one, day one to correspond to the date of his revaluation of values, we are, as his readers, supposed to laugh, and we are supposed to laugh because his "great politics" is a form of "fantasy politics" that is part of a Dionysian comedy he enacts in his 1888 works. To make my case, I begin by developing Nietzsche's notion of "great politics" and show how it is closely connected to his project of a revaluation of values. I then rehearse some reasons, which I have unpacked elsewhere, for reading Nietzsche's 1888 works as a Dionysian comedy that has important structural similarities to the plays of the ancient Greek comedian Aristophanes. Next, I show how Aristophanes's

1 Translations of *Ecce Homo* from Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Random House, 1998), 215–335.

comedies frequently indulge in a form of fantasy politics that compares to Nietzsche's own political fantasies of upheavals and convulsions "the likes of which has never been dreamed of." I conclude by noting that although Nietzsche's specific political proposals are ridiculous, the great politics of Nietzsche's Dionysian comedy is meant to liberate a kind of eros associated with Aristophanes that was historically condemned by the likes of Plato (*eros tyrannos*) and Augustine (*libido dominandi*). For this reason, the fantasy politics of Nietzsche's Dionysian comedy can have very serious social and political implications.

2. Nietzsche's Great Politics

Much has been written about Nietzsche's politics. In such discussions, his potential connections with National Socialism loom large. Whereas some have contended that Nietzsche endorses a form of "aristocratic radicalism," others have enlisted Nietzsche to develop agonistic conceptions of democracy.[2] Still others contend that Nietzsche "lacks a political philosophy"[3] and does not offer any "coherent politics."[4] In contrast to these latter interpreters, Hugo Drochon has appealed to Nietzsche's concept of "great politics" to argue that Nietzsche offers a coherent political program.[5] For Drochon, this program includes a vision of society consisting of "two separate spheres—a high cultural one, and a lower democratic one—with their own respective fields of responsibilities, but which importantly retain a degree of exchange between them." In his later works, Nietzsche calls for the creation of a party of life as a strategy to achieve this vision of society.[6]

2 See Hugo Drochon, *Nietzsche's Great Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 72–73, for an overview of this debate and the corresponding literature.

3 Brian Leiter, "Nietzsche's Moral and Political Philosophy," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. E. N. Zalta and U. Nodelman, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-moral-political, accessed January 8, 2026.

4 Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 10.

5 Drochon, *Nietzsche's Great Politics*, 3.

6 Ibid., 4.

As Drochon explains, Nietzsche inherits the phrase "great politics" from Otto von Bismarck, and Nietzsche transforms it for his own purposes.[7] For Bismarck, power or great politics was a matter of unifying Germany and making it into a significant force on the international stage. Whereas great politics focuses on international matters, "petty politics" limits itself to domestic affairs. However, the international character of Nietzsche's "great politics" is not about making a unified Germany into an important player on the international stage. Nietzsche rejects the narrow nationalism of Bismarck as petty politics and often mocks his fellow Germans. Instead, Nietzsche associates his great politics with a project of breeding a new caste of individuals (*herrschenden Kaste*) drawn from a variety of nations. These individuals will rule Europe by giving it "*one will*" and bring an end to "the long-drawn-out comedy" of Europe's many splinter states. Thus, Nietzsche promises an end to "petty politics" and a "fight for the dominion of the earth [*Erd-Herrschaft*]" (BGE 208).[8] This, at least in *Beyond Good and Evil*, is the essence of Nietzsche's "great politics."

The connections between Nietzsche's "great politics" and a "ruling caste" that will fight for "dominion of the earth" can be developed through other references in Nietzsche's published works and his *Nachlass* from this time. The concept of "rulers of the earth" (*die Herren der Erde*) first appears near the end of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* IV. In "The Drunken Song," Zarathustra repeatedly asks who the rulers of the earth might be (Z IV "Drunken Song": 4, 5, 7).[9] However, little is said in response to this question; we only learn that these rulers will somehow be "pure" (Z IV "Drunken Song": 7). One possible candidate for such a ruler is Zarathustra himself given that *Zarathustra* IV begins by presenting Zarathustra as anticipating his kingdom (*Reich*) of a thousand years (Z IV "The Honey Sacrifice").

We cannot be sure if Nietzsche considers Zarathustra to be such a ruler. However, we do know that the higher men who eventually gather

7 Ibid., 2.

8 Translations of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1989).

9 Translations of *Also sprach Zarathustra* from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Viking, 1954), 109–439.

in Zarathustra's cave are not such rulers. Although these are higher men in the sense that they somehow stand outside or above conventional morality, they are all nevertheless ill-constituted (*missrathen*) individuals and therefore not the "proper companions" of Zarathustra (Z IV "The Sign").[10] In "The Honey Sacrifice," Zarathustra is still waiting for "the sign" that tells him to go down among humans once more, and in the final section of *Zarathustra* IV, this sign finally comes to Zarathustra. In a rather mystical moment, Zarathustra finds himself surrounded by doves and a laughing lion at his feet. For Zarathustra, this means that his children—not to be confused with the higher men—are near, and there seems to be a close connection between the laughing lion and such children. Whether it is the laughing lion or the children, there is evidence from the *Nachlass* that indicates that these proper companions are well-constituted individuals (*wohlgerathen*) capable of ruling the earth.[11]

At the end of "The Sign," Zarathustra leaves his cave as a glowing sun ready to do his "work" (*Werk*). The nature of Zarathustra's "work" remains unclear. However, it seems to have something to do with the cultivation or breeding of these "rulers of the earth." In one *Nachlass* note, Nietzsche speaks of the "task" (*Aufgabe*) of cultivating "a ruling caste" (*eine herrschende Kaste*) with "most comprehensive souls" capable of "ruling the earth" (*Erdregierung*) (KSA 11:25[221]), and Nietzsche proposes a new morality to breed these "rulers of the earth" (KSA 11:37[8]) who have a desire to rule over other men and even replace God (KSA 11:25[137], 39[3]).

In the *Nachlass*, Nietzsche associates this caste of "good Europeans" who will "rule the earth" with the idea of the legislator or lawgiver (*Gesetzgeber*) of the future (KSA 11:35[9], 35[39]). In other notes, Nietzsche connects the idea of legislation to the philosopher of the future (KSA 11:35[47], 38[13]). This future philosopher is also supposed to be an artist

10 See Matthew Meyer, *The Routledge Guidebook to Nietzsche's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra"* (London: Routledge, 2025), 267–69 and 287 for a discussion of higher men as *missrathen* or ill-constituted.

11 KSA 14:344; KSA 11:32[15]. Nietzsche's unpublished notes (cited by volume number and fragment number) in the original German from *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. (Berlin: DTV, De Gruyter, 1999).

that is related to Dionysus in some way (KSA 11:34[201]; KSA 13:23[8]). Nietzsche's philosopher of the future is a philosopher in the sense that he or she is concerned with value. This philosopher, however, is an artist in the sense that the task of the philosopher is the creation—rather than the discovery—of new values (KSA 11:35[47]). Nature is valueless (GS 301),[12] and the task of the philosopher is to determine the "where to" and "what for" of human beings (KSA 11:38[13]).

These conceptual connections can be found in *Beyond Good and Evil* itself. Only three aphorisms after first mentioning "great politics," Nietzsche unpacks his understanding of "genuine philosophers" as those capable of commanding, legislating, and ultimately creating value (BGE 211). Near the beginning of chapter 8, Nietzsche introduces the notion of the "good European" (BGE 241), and he concludes the chapter with the claim that "Europe wants to become one" (a reference to the concept of "great politics" in BGE 208) (BGE 256). In the final chapter of BGE, Nietzsche sketches the kind of noble human being he wants to cultivate, and he identifies the political and social conditions necessary for this project (BGE 257). He then concludes the work with a call for a kind of Dionysian philosophy that will risk an order of rank among philosophers according to their ability to laugh (BGE 294-295), a point that has some prima facie connection to the "laughing lions" at the end of *Zarathustra* IV.

Nietzsche also presents his hopes for "*new philosophers*" in the final aphorism of chapter 5 of BGE, "Natural History of Morals." These new philosophers are supposed to be led by a faith that can oppose the current "democratic movement" causing the decay and diminution of the human being. In contrast, these new philosophers will be strong enough to "revalue and invert" what were once thought to be eternal values. In short, such philosophers will be tasked with nothing less than "a revaluation of values" (*eine Umwerthung der Werthe*) (BGE 203).

As Drochon has rightly argued, Nietzsche's concept of "great politics" is closely linked to Nietzsche's larger project of a revaluation of values.[13]

12 Translations of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1974).

13 Drochon, *Nietzsche's Great Politics*, chap. 5.

Whereas one is forced to connect the aphoristic dots between these two concepts in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche closely associates "great politics" and his "revaluation of values" in *Ecce Homo*. He begins the first section of "Why I Am a Destiny" by writing: "Revaluation of all values: that is my formula for an act of supreme self-examination on the part of humanity, become flesh and genius in me." The final paragraph of the same section concludes with the passage cited at the beginning of this essay: "it is only beginning with me that the earth knows *great politics*" (EH "Destiny": 1).

The structure of the final chapter of *Ecce Homo* suggests that Nietzsche's revaluation of values—and therefore his great politics—is based on the opposition between two deities: Dionysus and the Crucified. Nietzsche begins "Why I Am a Destiny" with a reference to his great politics and ends the chapter almost screaming at his readers: "Have I been understood?—*Dionysus versus the Crucified*" (EH "Destiny": 9). Since Nietzsche endeavors to present himself as the "last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus" throughout *Ecce Homo* and then publishes a book called *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche's revaluation clearly has something to do with promoting the values symbolized by Dionysus and demoting or overturning the values symbolized by the Crucified.

Nietzsche indicates in other passages that his own revaluation project is an attempt to overturn Christianity's initial revaluation of ancient values, which itself was a form of great politics. In the first mention of a revaluation of all values in his published works, Nietzsche emphasizes the extent to which "the paradoxical formula 'god on the cross'" represented a bold inversion of the values of antiquity (BGE 46). At the end of *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche explains the way in which Christian morality grew from a degenerating and parasitical type of human being and constituted a revaluation of values (EH "Destiny": 7). Finally, Nietzsche explains the way in which the Jewish-led slave revolt in morality, which culminated in the invention of Christian love (GM I:8),[14] constituted both a revaluation

14 Translations of *Zur Genealogie der Moral* from Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Random House, 1989), 13–163.

of enemies' values (GM I:7) and a truly "great [*grossen*] politics of revenge" (GM I:8). Given that Nietzsche understands Christianity as a form of "great politics" that successfully revalued the values of antiquity, we can infer that the essence of Nietzsche's great politics and his related project of a revaluation of values is to undo or reverse what Christianity did.

It has been shown in the secondary literature that Nietzsche originally establishes the opposition between Dionysus and the Crucified in the final chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil*,[15] and these passages, in turn, further substantiate what GM I:8 suggests: the revaluation of values is fundamentally about love (see also TI "Improvers": 4).[16] Specifically, Nietzsche establishes the opposition at the end of *Beyond Good and Evil* by offering contrasting portrayals of Jesus as the "knower of the heart" (BGE 269) and Dionysus as the "genius of the heart" (BGE 295). In BGE 269, Nietzsche portrays Jesus as a man who wanted nothing more than to be loved. However, Jesus knew the human heart well enough to know that human love could not satisfy his need for love. According to Nietzsche, this led him to invent a god that was all love. But Nietzsche cryptically notes that the kind of person who thinks this way about love—the essence of which is self-sacrifice—ultimately seeks death (BGE 269).

Whereas the presentation of Jesus as the knower of the heart is explicitly about love and the nature of love, Nietzsche's portrayal of Dionysus as the genius of the heart is less so. Nevertheless, Nietzsche presents Dionysus as a god who philosophizes (BGE 295), and this is an allusion to and a repudiation of Plato's understanding of love as eros in the *Symposium*. According to Plato, gods do not philosophize because they are wise, and since all desire stems from lack, gods do not have a desire for or love of wisdom. Although one might think that Nietzsche is therefore rejecting the eros tradition altogether, there are reasons for thinking that he is endorsing a conception of eros associated with a pre-Socratic poetic tradition that Plato both identifies and then rejects in the *Symposium*.

15 Martin Kornberger, "Zur Genealogie des 'Ecce homo,'" *Nietzsche-Studien* 27, no. 1 (1998): 319–38.

16 Translations of *Götzen-Dämmerung* from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Viking, 1954), 463–564.

The most prominent speech and rival to Plato's own conception of eros in the *Symposium* is given by Aristophanes. At stake in these two conceptions of eros is the question about the good, that is, the source of value. For Plato, eros longs to be associated with an objective source of value in the Form of the Good. In contrast, Aristophanes makes the self into the good; that is, something is good because it is mine or belongs to me or because I value it. Although Aristophanes's speech is often hailed as an ancient model for modern romantic love,[17] Aristophanes's main account of post-Lapsarian eros is about humans longing to find their other halves and so, ultimately, themselves.

At the same time, Paul Ludwig has also found in Aristophanes's speech a pre-Lapsarian "Ur-eros" that initially animates self-loving humans to try to displace the gods.[18] The human attempt to overthrow the gods is what animates Zeus to split human beings in half, and this puts humans on a potentially perpetual quest to recapture the self-love that they initially had as whole human beings. This dynamic of humans trying to achieve divine-like status is, however, not limited to Aristophanes's speech. Instead, it can be found in at least two of Aristophanes's plays, *Peace* and *Birds*, and it is in *Birds* that we encounter a comic hero who, driven by eros, succeeds in displacing Zeus as the ruling divinity of Greece. Taken together, we can say that the primeval form of Aristophanic eros consists of a self-love that ultimately tries to deify the human.

Beyond Good and Evil provides three pieces of evidence for thinking that Nietzsche is trying to revive the type of eros associated with Aristophanes. First, Nietzsche associates this eros with Dionysus, and Aristophanes's plays were performed in honor of Dionysus.[19] Second, Nietzsche precedes his reference to a philosophizing Dionysus in BGE 295 with the claim that gods both philosophize and enjoy laughter "at the expense of all serious things." In the same aphorism, Nietzsche then

17 Robert Solomon, *About Love: Reinventing Romance for our Times* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 62–63.

18 Paul W. Ludwig, *Eros and Polis: Desire and Community in Greek Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 98.

19 Dionysus is also the judge of the speeches on eros in Plato's *Symposium*.

proposes to "risk an order of rank among philosophers depending on the rank of their laughter—all the way up to those capable of *golden* laughter" (BGE 294). The implication is twofold: there is some connection between Dionysian eros and laughter, and laughter will be an essential part of the philosophy of the future. Such a connection between laughter and the future is substantiated by another passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* in which Nietzsche explicitly refers to Aristophanes: "we are the first age that has truly studied 'costumes' . . . prepared like no previous age for a carnival in the grand style, for the laughter and high spirits of the most spiritual revelry, for the transcendental heights of the highest nonsense and Aristophanean derision of the world. Perhaps this is where we shall still discover the realm of our *invention*, that realm in which we, too, can still be original, say, as parodists of world history and God's Hanswurst [*Hanswurst Gottes*][20]—perhaps, even if nothing else today has any future, our *laughter* may yet have a future" (BGE 223).

The distinction between Platonic eros and Aristophanic/Dionysian eros at the end of *Beyond Good and Evil* can be further understood in terms of the distinction that Nietzsche draws at the beginning of the book between the will to truth (Platonic eros) and the will to power (Aristophanic/Dionysian eros). Both phrases are variants of Schopenhauer's locution of the "will to life," and Nietzsche's first mention of the will to power in his *Nachlass* shows that he intends it to be a direct modification of Schopenhauer's will to life (KSA 10:3[1]; see also Z II "On Self-Overcoming"). We know from *The World as Will and Representation* that Schopenhauer associates the will to life with eros, noting that both Hesiod and Parmenides made the god Eros into a fundamental principle of nature and the creator of all things (WWR 1:60).[21] Given these associations, there are reasons for thinking of the will to life, the will to truth, and the will to power as forms of eros.

Although he does not distinguish between an eros associated with ancient Greek poetry and the eros that Plato defends in the *Symposium*,

20 I have modified Kaufmann's translation of "*Hanswurst Gottes*."

21 Translation of Arthur Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (abbreviated as WWR with volume number and section number) from *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York, NY: Dover, 1969).

Schopenhauer does draw a sharp distinction between Greek eros and Christian agape, and this distinction parallels the opposition that Nietzsche establishes between Dionysus, as the genius of the heart, and the Crucified, as the knower of the heart, at the end of both *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Ecce Homo*. Specifically, Schopenhauer claims that whereas eros can be understood as a form of self-love or *Selbstsucht*—Zarathustra identifies *Selbstsucht* as the gift-giving virtue (ZI "On the Gift-Giving Virtue")—agape can be understood as a form of selfless pity (*Mitleid*) (WWR 1:67)—which is the final sin that Zarathustra needs to overcome in *Zarathustra* IV. Schopenhauer then links eros to the affirmation of life, and he claims that the affirmation of the will to life was expressed through phallus worship in ancient fertility cults (WWR 1:60). However, Christianity made eros into the root of sin, symbolized by the person of Adam. In contrast to eros, Christian agape represents the overcoming of sin through the gradual denial of life or eros through ascetic practices, and the "symbol or personification of the denial of the will-to-live" is none other than the crucified Christ (WWR 1:70).

Much has been written about Nietzsche's revaluation of values,[22] but the idea here is that Nietzsche inherits the opposition between eros and agape found at the end of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* and inverts the value that Schopenhauer assigns to each.[23] Whereas he castigates eros and the affirmation of life as a principle of evil, Schopenhauer sees agape and the denial of the will as the ultimate path toward redemption from life and the world. Nietzsche, in contrast, simply inverts the relationship. As Zarathustra exhorts, we must remain faithful to the earth (Z I "Prologue": 3), and Nietzsche establishes life as the standard by which everything is judged (BGE 4). Thus, eros, as an expression of the will to life or power, should be celebrated and the

22 Most recently, see Thomas Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Revaluation of All Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

23 Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953) was one of the first to understand Nietzsche's revaluation of values in terms of the opposition between eros and agape. However, Nygren took Plato's understanding of eros to be paradigmatic for the ancient Greek, saying nothing about an alternative conception of eros in ancient Greek poetry that predates Plato.

morality of pity associated with agape and the denial of the will to life needs to be condemned. This is precisely what Nietzsche does at the beginning of *The Antichrist*, the work that begins, and possibly completes, his revaluation of values.

If it is right to associate Nietzsche's "great politics" with his project of a revaluation of values, then Nietzsche's great politics is, at its core, a form of spiritual warfare that seeks to restore a good conscience to the kind of eros that Nietzsche associates with both Aristophanes and Dionysus. In this sense, Nietzsche's great politics is about questions of desire, value, and ethics that transcend politics in a narrower sense. At the same time, I argue below that Nietzsche's attempt to liberate this sort of eros from its demonization in the Platonic-Christian tradition expresses itself in a form of "fantasy politics" that is a common feature of Aristophanic comedy and part of Nietzsche's own comedy in his 1888 works.

3. Great Politics and Nietzsche's Dionysian Comedy

Although I have sketched this argument elsewhere,[24] I want to say something about how Nietzsche's post-*Zarathustra* writings—especially those he composed in 1888—have the form of a Dionysian comedy. This will further substantiate my claim that Nietzsche is looking to revive a form of eros associated with Aristophanic comedy and situate Nietzsche's great politics within a larger interpretive framework. This will, in turn, enable me to draw out more specific connections between Nietzsche's great politics and what scholars have called the fantasy politics of Aristophanic comedy.

Part of the reason for reading Nietzsche's 1888 works as a Dionysian comedy comes from a larger interpretive framework of Nietzsche's oeuvre that I have articulated elsewhere.[25] I have argued that *Zarathustra* should

24 See Matthew Meyer, "The Comic Nature of *Ecce Homo*," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 43 (2012): 32-43 and Matthew Meyer, "The Divine Hanswurst: Nietzsche on Laughter and Comedy," in *All Too Human: Laughter, Humor, and Comedy in Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Lydia L. Moland (New York, NY: Springer, 2018), 32–43.

25 See Matthew Meyer, *Reading Nietzsche through the Ancients: An Analysis of Becoming, Perspectivism, and the Principle of Non-Contradiction* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 277–78, and Meyer, *The Routledge Guidebook*, 331–32.

be understood as a tragic trilogy in *Zarathustra* I-III followed by a satyr play in *Zarathustra* IV.[26] Given that Nietzsche also writes his own dithyrambs (*Dionysian Dithyrambs*), reading his 1888 works as a comedy would mean that Nietzsche wrote in all four poetic genres associated with Dionysus. Clues for such a reading of Nietzsche's mature works begin as early as *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche speaks of both tragedy and comedy as possible solutions to the death of God (GS 153) and indicates that the tragedy (of *Zarathustra*) will eventually return to "the eternal comedy of existence" (GS 1). In the satyr play of *Zarathustra* IV, Zarathustra exhorts his higher men to learn how to laugh and promises the coming of a "good gay Hanswurst" who will make us laugh again (ZIV "The Greeting"). I have noted above that Nietzsche juxtaposes the announcement of his discipleship to Dionysus with a call for a rank order of philosophers according to the rank of their laughter at the end of BGE (BGE 294), and he ends the *Genealogy* with the claim that only comedians are capable of harming the ascetic ideal (GM III:26–27). Indeed, every one of Nietzsche's works written after *Zarathustra* III and before his 1888 writings ends with some reference to laughter and comedy, including the 1886-87 prefaces to *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT "Attempt": 7)[27] and GS (GS "Preface": 4).

Just as the reference to tragedy in the title of GS 342 foreshadows the tragedy of *Zarathustra*, I interpret the references to comedy and laughter in his post-*Zarathustra* works (as well as the promise of an eventual comedy in GS 1) to be proleptic in nature. That is, they foreshadow Nietzsche's own comedy in his 1888 works. Exemplary here is the fact that Nietzsche eventually presents himself as the Hanswurst—a stock figure from eighteenth-century Viennese comedy—that Zarathustra promises in *Zarathustra* IV. In the very section from EH in which he articulates his concept of "great politics," Nietzsche writes that he would rather be a Hanswurst than a saint and that he perhaps is a Hanswurst (EH "Destiny": 1). In an 1889 letter, he writes that a certain "divine Hanswurst" has finished

26 See Meyer, *The Routledge Guidebook*.

27 Translation of *Die Geburt der Tragödie* from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1967), 15–151.

his dithyrambs (KSB 8:1240),[28] and Nietzsche writes in another letter from November 1888: "I'm making so many pranks with myself and have such private-Hanswurst-fantasies that I just grin for a half an hour on the open streets" (KSB 8:1157). Thus, whatever wars, convulsions, and upheavals Nietzsche promises, one must remember that they are the promises of someone who also presents himself as a Hanswurst.

One of the most important features of Old Comedy for my purposes is that the genre is performed in honor of Dionysus. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche presents himself not only as a comic Hanswurst but also a "disciple of the philosopher Dionysus" (EH "Preface": 2), which he first announces in *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE 295) and then repeats at the end of *Twilight of the Idols* (TI "What I Owe": 5). Even more so than tragedy, comedy gives direct expression to life-affirming drives and attitudes that acknowledge human embodiment and emphasize our continuity with animals. The Greek word for comedy is derived from *kōmos*, and a komos is a drunken procession and revelry that sometimes follows upon a symposium and is often linked to victory celebrations and weddings. Comedy, as a dramatic form, emerges from and gives expression to this general atmosphere of celebration, and Aristophanic comedy provides several depictions of the komos in the plays themselves.[29]

Although I think some of Nietzsche's 1888 texts are or can be "funny," especially when read aloud, my argument that these texts constitute a comedy does not turn on the subjective responses of readers. Instead, my primary argument is that two structural features of Old Comedy shape Nietzsche's 1888 works: the parabasis and the agon. The parabasis was a common feature of Old Comedy, but it eventually faded away as the genre transitioned to what became known as New Comedy. It is a moment in the play in which the chorus faces the audience, and the chorus leader steps forward and directly addresses the audience, usually on behalf or in the name of the comic poet. One of the key features of the parabasis

28 Nietzsche's letters (cited by volume number and letter number) in the original German from *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Briefe. Kritische Studienausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 8 vols. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986).

29 See Babette Pütz, *The Symposium and Komos in Aristophanes* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003).

is that it is autobiographical,[30] and the comic poet would often use the parabasis to construct a rhetorically inflated persona that exaggerates his prowess and standing. One example of such a parabasis can be found in Aristophanes's *Clouds*. There, Aristophanes presents himself as a most wise (*sophos*) (521) and clever (*dexios*) (548) poet, raised by Dionysus himself (520). The problem, however, is that his audience often fails to recognize his greatness, and this explains why he did not win the contest in the initial performance of the play. The connections to Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* should be clear. As a disciple of the philosopher Dionysus, he presents himself as wise, clever, a writer of good books, and ultimately a destiny. His contemporary readership, however, is quite the opposite, and they fail to appreciate his genius. The point of *Ecce Homo* is not so much for Nietzsche to give an account of his life, but rather to tell his readers who he is (EH "Preface": 1). It is for this reason that I have characterized *Ecce Homo* as a comic parabasis of self-definition.

As a general term, agon refers to a struggle, conflict, or contest, and the young Nietzsche, in "Homer's Contest," celebrates the way in which contests and competitions were essential to ancient Greek culture. Indeed, the spirit of the agon or contest permeated Greek comedy as comic poets would vie for prizes at the Dionysia.[31] However, the agon is also a structural feature of Old Comedy. Specifically, it is a point in the comedy in which there is a conflict or struggle between the comic hero or protagonist and an antagonist that can include members of the chorus. The agon eventually resolves in favor of the protagonist, and a komos often occurs near the end of the play to celebrate the hero's victory.

The significance of the agon in Nietzsche's work has been well documented by a range of scholars, and some have argued that Nietzsche engages in this sort of agon in his own writings. For instance, Christa Davis Acampora has identified three primary antagonists for Nietzsche:

30 Ralph Rosen, "Cratinus' *Pytine* and the Construction of the Comic Self," in *The Rivals of Aristophanes: Studies in Athenian Old Comedy*, eds. D. Harvey and J. Wilkins (London: Duckworth, 2000), 23–39.

31 See Zachary P. Biles, *Aristophanes and the Poetics of Competition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Paul, Socrates, and Wagner.[32] Although Nietzsche is contesting with each of these figures throughout his career, these contests reach their apex in his 1888 works. Whereas Nietzsche launches ad hominem attacks—a practice known in antiquity as *onomasti kōmōidein*—against Socrates in *Twilight of the Idols* that are reminiscent of Aristophanes's slander of Socrates in the *Clouds* (TI "Problem of Socrates"), he mocks Wagner in both *The Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. He then places Paul at the center of his critique of Christianity in *The Antichrist*. This is all well established in the secondary literature. My claim, however, is that Nietzsche's performative agon in these final works should be interpreted as part of his own comedy, and this has the advantage of linking these elements of his works to a poetic genre associated with Dionysus.

The most pronounced contest that Nietzsche enacts in these works is between the psychological, ethical, and political values he associates with Dionysus and those he associates with the Crucified. As noted above, the final lines of *Ecce Homo* read: "Have I been understood?—Dionysus versus the Crucified" (EH "Destiny": 9). In terms of ancient literature, Nietzsche is constructing here what is known as a literary krisis (the root word for both "crisis," which Nietzsche promises, and "criticism" in the sense of literary criticism). The tradition of a literary krisis in ancient Greece dates to the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*, which was the focus of some of Nietzsche's earliest philological writings. Another example of such a krisis is the opposition Plato establishes between the philosopher and the tyrant in the *Republic*. The literary krisis was also central to Old Comedy. Two plays stand out in this respect: Cratinus's *Archilochoi* and Aristophanes's *Frogs*. We have only fragments of the former, but we know that it consisted of a contest between the iambic poet Archilochus and epic poets like Homer and Hesiod. Aristophanes's *Frogs* borrows from Cratinus's play, creating a similar opposition between Aeschylus and Euripides,[33] and Nietzsche appeals to evidence from the *Frogs* in *The Birth of Tragedy* to support his claim that Euripides was responsible for the death of tragedy.

32 Christa Davis Acampora, *Contesting Nietzsche* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

33 Emmanuela Bakola, *Cratinus and the Art of Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 65-78.

It is within the comic context of his post-*Zarathustra* writings that Nietzsche, exaggerating his own standing and prowess, engages in "great politics." Thus, he boldly proclaims that his name will be associated with "a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up *against* everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far" (EH "Destiny": 1). The wars, however, that Nietzsche promises are ultimately a form of spiritual warfare, a war between what he calls "the party of life" and an opposing "vengefulness against life." Nietzsche makes this claim in a late *Nachlass* note, and he combines it with an attempt to articulate some basic principles of his great politics. These principles include making physiology into the queen of all questions and bringing an end to everything decaying and parasitic. It also includes a "war to the death against vice." Nietzsche defines vice as anything contrary to nature, and he condemns the priest for teaching antinatural doctrines (KSA 13:25[1]).

Nietzsche makes this principle of his great politics into the first of his seven laws against Christianity at the end of *The Antichrist*: "Vice is any sort of antinature. The most vicious type of person is the priest" (KSA 6:254). The "Laws against Christianity" are therefore part of Nietzsche's great politics, and they are a clear example of his own activity as a law-giving philosopher of the future. In laying down these laws, Nietzsche also seems to declare victory over Christianity. He does so by redating September 30, 1888 of the "wrong" calendar to day one, year one of his own calendar, which he declares to be a "day of salvation" (*Tage des Heils*). In his latest letters, Nietzsche continues to celebrate his victory. On January 3, 1889, he writes to Meta von Salis: "The world is transfigured, because god is on the earth: Do you not see how the heavens are rejoicing? I have taken possession of my empire [*Reich*], am throwing the Pope in jail and having Wilhelm, Bismarck, and Stöcker shot" (KSB 8:1239).

As the letter indicates, Nietzsche is taking aim not only at large-scale cultural forces like Christianity and historical figures like Socrates and Paul but also present-day political, religious, and cultural figures, and Wilhelm II, Otto von Bismarck, and Adolf Stöcker are all part of Nietzsche's broader attack on the House of Hohenzollern. Elsewhere, Nietzsche writes

a "proclamation" in which he calls for the destruction of the House of Hohenzollern. In so doing, he mentions both Aristophanes and laughter. In an 1888 letter to Heinrich Köselitz, he boasts of having written "with heroic-Aristophanic hubris" "a proclamation to the European courts for a destruction of the House of Hohenzollern" (KSB 8:1227). Nietzsche eventually sent this "proclamation" to Jean Bordeau, the editor of the *Journal des débats* on the first day of 1889. In the letter, Nietzsche writes: "I sincerely believe it is possible to bring order to the entire absurd condition of Europe through a world-historical laughter" (KSB 8:1232).

Nietzsche's attempts to redate the calendar, legislate new laws, throw the pope in jail, destroy the House of Hohenzollern, and even unify Europe are all clearly ridiculous. Simply put, the lonely and largely unread philologist has no authority or standing to do any of this, and they are the demands of someone who presents himself variously as a Hanswurst, a satyr, a disciple of Dionysus, and even a god. As Nietzsche explicitly acknowledges, this is all done with "heroic-Aristophanic hubris." In this sense, his "great politics" is also a "fantasy politics." At the same time, the comedy has a serious upshot: it is all part of a power fantasy in which Nietzsche laughs Christianity to death. He does so by drawing attention to the arbitrary and, in his view, illegitimate basis for our current calendar and by highlighting the fact that we could implement a new set of customs that celebrate, rather than condemn, the psychic impulses and energies central to the affirmation of life. In the next section, I say more about the fantasy politics of Aristophanic comedy and explain in further detail why I think Nietzsche's "great politics" is also a form of fantasy politics.

4. The Fantasy Politics of Aristophanic Comedy

I borrow the term "fantasy politics" from the title of a well-known article by William Arrowsmith about Aristophanes's *Birds*: "Aristophanes' *Birds*: The Fantasy Politics of Eros."[34] Although Arrowsmith's article focuses on the *Birds*, I think the term "fantasy politics" can be used to describe

34 William Arrowsmith, "Aristophanes' *Birds*: The Fantasy Politics of Eros," *Arion* 1, no. 1 (Spring, 1973): 119–67.

much of what goes on in Aristophanes's plays.[35] In this section, I discuss the contents of some of Aristophanes's earliest comedies, highlighting themes that have parallels to Nietzsche's "great politics." I conclude with a discussion of eros and fantasy in the *Birds*, the play that relates most closely to Nietzsche's "great politics" and his 1888 writings.

The fantastical nature of Old Comedy is exemplified in Aristophanes's earliest extant play, *The Acharnians*. The name of the main character, who is briefly identified with Aristophanes himself, is Dikaiopolis.[36] The name translates as "just city," and Dikaiopolis, an otherwise lowly peasant, conducts himself as a one-man city state throughout most of the play. The play begins with Dikaiopolis sitting in the assembly, frustrated by the ongoing war with Sparta, led by allegedly corrupt politicians. However, he devises a solution. With the help of a fictional demigod, he plots to negotiate a private peace with Sparta. In comic fashion, his fantastic solution quickly becomes reality, and he plans to hold a Dionysian festival to celebrate the peace treaty. Although he is interrupted by a chorus of Acharnians, angry that he is opting out of the war, he eventually assuages the chorus by reminding them of the pleasures of peace, and this allows Dikaiopolis to erect his own agora and engage in international trade. The play ends with a drunken Dikaiopolis mocking his pro-war opponent, Lamachus, and leading everyone in celebration.

Like Dikaiopolis, Nietzsche claims to operate free from the customs and norms of his time, presenting himself as the most independent man in Europe. Nietzsche makes such claims in the first mention of "great politics" in his writings. In an 1884 letter to Franz Overbeck, he writes: "I am now, with great probability, the most independent man in Europe. My goals and tasks are more comprehensive than anyone else's—and that, which I call great politics, provides at least a good standpoint and bird's eye view for contemporary matters" (KSB 6:507). This is the first

35 See also Stephen Halliwell, *Aristophanes: Birds and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxi–xxx on the "dynamics of fantasy" in Aristophanes.

36 See Biles, *Aristophanes and the Poetics of Competition*, chap. 2 on the close associations between the poetic persona of Aristophanes and the character Dikaiopolis.

of several post-*Zarathustra* letters in which Nietzsche emphasizes his independence and the independence of his writings. In 1886, Nietzsche explains to his publisher that he is the most independent thinker of his time (KSB 6:740), and, in an 1888 letter, he claims: "it is something to be the most independent spirit in Europe. I have in every bigger city a circle of admirers, even in Baltimore" (KSB 8:1071). He makes similar assertions about his books. In both the *Nachlass* and *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche claims to have given humanity the deepest book in *Zarathustra* and that he will soon give humanity the most independent, a likely reference to either *Ecce Homo* or *The Antichrist* (TI "Skirmishes": 51; KSA 13:18[5]).

Just as Nietzsche's independence is closely linked to his attempt to overturn the social order, ancient comedy emerges from a ritual atmosphere in which the boundaries of everyday life are not only transgressed but often inverted, and Aristophanes's comedies often exhibit these same dynamics.[37] As Stephen Halliwell writes, several of Aristophanes's plays indulge in fantasies that exhibit "a complete transmutation of social and political conditions," oftentimes inverting normal power relations.[38] For instance, three of Aristophanes's extant plays present women rising to power in a male-dominated world. In the *Lysistrata*, women bring an end to the war by engaging in a sex strike. In the *Assemblywomen*, the female hero, Praxagora, has women take over the assembly, and they then legislate a communism of both property and sex to comic effect.

A clear case of this inversion of the standard order is Aristophanes's second extant play, the *Knights*, where a lowly sausage seller eventually rises to political power and morphs into the "city's god-sent savior" (148).[39] Much like Nietzsche's rivalry with the House of Hohenzollern, the sausage seller faces down the real-life Athenian statesman Cleon,

37 See Anton Bierl, *Ritual and Performativity: The Chorus in Old Comedy* (Washington DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2009).

38 Halliwell, *Aristophanes: Birds*, xxiv.

39 Translation of Aristophanes's *Hippeis* (as *Knights*, cited by line number) from *Aristophanes: Wasps and Other Plays*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 67–144.

represented by the character Paphlagon in the play. They vie for power by trying to court Demos (the people), and the sausage seller wins by proving that he is even more shameless than Cleon (180, 276, 408). The play ends with the chorus inviting the sausage seller to the Prytaneion to occupy Cleon's former place, and the sausage seller assigns Cleon to selling sausages at the city gates (1395-1405). The swapping of Cleon for the sausage seller represents a complete inversion of normal power relations.

The transmutation of social and political conditions is most evident in comedy's celebration of shamelessness, and Halliwell has characterized comedy as a form of "institutionalized shamelessness."[40] There are at least two notable features of Old Comedy that attest to this. First, comedy allows for and even celebrates parrhesia, or frank speech, and, much like contemporary standup comedy, it frequently employs obscene words. As Ralph Rosen explains, "obscenity has been recognized since antiquity as one of the defining hallmarks of Greek Old Comedy. The Greeks themselves referred to it as aischrologia, 'shameful speech.'"[41] The second feature is the omnipresent role that the phallus plays in Old Comedy. Not only did Aristotle claim that phallic processions were the ritualistic forerunner to the genre, a comedy like *The Acharnians* contains a representation of such a procession. Moreover, the costumes of almost all male characters in Old Comedy were equipped with an externally displayed phallus. As Halliwell notes, the open display of genitalia "automatically put them at odds with the norms of Athenian society."[42]

Nietzsche emphasizes the importance of overcoming shame in ways that can be connected to his own Dionysian comedy. In *The Gay Science*,

40 Stephen Halliwell, "Aristophanic Sex: The Erotics of Shamelessness," in *The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome*, eds. Martha Nussbaum and Juha Sihvola (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 124.

41 Ralph M. Rosen, "Aischrology in Old Comedy and the Question of 'Ritual Obscenity," in *Carnaval et comédie: Actes du colloque international organisé par l'équipe*, ed. Malika Bastin Hammou and Charalampos Orfanos (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2015), 19.

42 Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 253.

Nietzsche twice mentions the need to overcome shame. At the end of the all-important aphorism, "Our ultimate gratitude to art," Nietzsche speaks of the way in which wearing a "fool's cap" will allow one to stand, even float, above morality. The aphorism then ends with the claim that "as long as you are in any way *ashamed* before yourselves, you do not yet belong with us" (GS 107). At the end of the third book of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche claims that "the seal of liberation" is "no longer being ashamed in front of oneself" (GS 275). This is set within a series of aphorisms that surround Nietzsche's first explicit call—since *Schopenhauer as Educator*—to "become the person you are" (GS 270). The implication is that becoming who one is somehow involves overcoming shame, and if *Ecce Homo*, the work in which Nietzsche presents himself as having become who he is, is a comic parabasis of self-definition, then we can connect Nietzsche's call to overcome shame to the centerpiece of his own Dionysian comedy.

Immediately preceding the call to become who we are, Nietzsche also refers to the task of determining the weights of all things anew and so a kind of revaluation of values (GS 269). As noted above, Nietzsche's revaluation project can be understood as an attempt to revalue the life-affirming impulses that Schopenhauer claims are expressed in fertility cults and symbolized by phallus worship (WWR 1:60). In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche explicitly connects the celebration of sexuality and fertility with Dionysus: "For it is only in the Dionysian mysteries, in the psychology of the Dionysian state, that the *basic fact* of the Hellenic instinct finds expression—its 'will to life.' . . . For the Greeks the *sexual* symbol was therefore the venerable symbol par excellence, the real profundity in the whole of ancient piety" (TI "What I Owe": 4). Here again, it is Dionysian comedy, rather than tragedy, that both expresses and affirms human sexuality.

Despite the phallic innuendo implicit in the selling of sausages and the general shamelessness of the sausage seller in the *Knights*, he is nevertheless hailed as the savior of Athens. The Greek word used to describe the sausage seller as a savior (*sōtēr*) is the same word used in the Bible to describe Jesus, and just as Nietzsche, qua Hanswurst,

presents himself as the new redeemer in *Ecce Homo*, Aristophanes also presents the comic heroes of the *Peace* and the *Birds* as saviors of their larger communities. In the *Peace*, the protagonist Trygaeus is on a mission to restore peace during the Peloponnesian War, and he decides to mount the skies to confront the gods about the matter. In this way, he is compared to Bellerophon's tragic attempt to fly up to the heavens by riding on the winged Pegasus (76–77).[43] However, there is one comic difference: Trygaeus does so by mounting a dung beetle, and this provides occasion for loads of scatological humor throughout the opening scenes. When Trygaeus arrives, he finds Mount Olympus largely abandoned by the gods. Only Hermes is there to greet him, and a personified War has locked up a personified Peace in a cavern. Trygaeus eventually frees Peace from the cave and returns to earth. The play ends with a celebratory wedding between Trygaeus and a personified Harvest as his bride, much like Nietzsche's holy wedding in "The Aftersong" at the end of *Beyond Good and Evil*: "Sure of our victory, we celebrate/ The feast of feasts:/ Friend Zarathustra came, the guest of guests!/ The world now laughs, rent are the drapes of fright,/ The wedding is at hand of dark and light."

Almost all of Aristophanes's early comedies incorporate elements of real-world politics—notably the persons and events associated with the Peloponnesian War—into a fantasy landscape that includes magical oracle sellers, flying dung beetles, personifications of war and peace, and the Greek gods. The audience is then invited to vicariously experience the power and exploits of the comic hero as he (or she) transcends convention in a quest to reform society according to his (or her) own wishes (the *Clouds* is the most significant exception to this). These dynamics reach their apex in the most important comedy for my purposes, Aristophanes's *Birds*, where a disgruntled Athenian, Peisetairos (along with his sidekick, Euelpides), leaves behind Athens and, with the help of the birds, eventually replaces Zeus as the reigning deity.

43 Translation of Aristophanes's *Eirēnē* (as *Peace*, cited by line number) from *Aristophanes: Wasps and Other Plays*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 227–98.

Peisetairos lives out his power fantasy by convincing the birds that they have a right to rule, and they, in turn, help him build a wall that blocks sacrifices from humans to starve out the supposedly immortal gods. As Halliwell notes, "power . . . lies at the heart of Peisetairos' scheme, a power for the birds that will involve them not only in 'colonizing' . . . and controlling the whole sky, but also thereby in blockading the territory and intercepting the trade of their rivals, the gods. This is power politics and international relations on the largest scale imaginable."[44] Peisetairos's quest for power, however, is not without a fight, and just as Nietzsche promises "wars the like of which have never yet been seen on earth," Aristophanes casts the battle between Peisetairos and the Olympian gods as a form of gigantomachy in which Peisetairos is victorious (553, 823–25, 1249–52).[45]

At the heart of the *Birds* is a conception of eros that looks a lot like what Plato characterizes as tyrannical eros in the *Republic* and what Nietzsche calls the will to power. Indeed, the play ends with Peisetairos being hailed as *tyrannos* or ruler (1708), wearing the wings of Eros (1736), wielding Zeus's thunderbolt, and possessing Zeus's princess as his bride. In the parabasis, a section of the comedy normally devoted to rhetorically inflating the standing of the comic poet, Aristophanes borrows from Hesiod's *Theogony* to give an account of the origins of the universe, and the account makes the god Eros into a cosmic force akin to Schopenhauer's will to life. The immediate point of this account is to justify the birds' right to rule, which, in turn, allows Peisetairos to convince the birds that they should work with him to overthrow the gods. The underlying principle is that those born first should be first to rule, and since the birds were born before the gods, they should join with Peisetairos to recapture what rightfully belongs to them.

It is on this basis that Peisetairos, along with Euelpides, begins to construct his city, and they begin by naming it: "Cloudcuckooland" (818).

44 Halliwell, *Aristophanes: Birds*, 6.

45 Translation of Aristophanes's *Ornithes* (as *Birds*, cited by line number) from *Aristophanes: Birds and Other Plays*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1–78.

After being confronted with a series of intruders and dispatching each one of them, Peisetairos is informed that the wall blocking the sacrifices to the gods has been successfully completed. However, the gods soon send Iris, a messenger, to warn Peisetairos of the gods' wrath, but Peisetairos fearlessly responds by threatening both her and Zeus, and Iris departs. The birds are ready to "rule the world," and Peisetairos claims that it is now the gods' turn to take orders (1226). In one of his final *Nachlass* notes, Nietzsche makes a similar claim: now that "the old god has been abolished, I am ready *to rule the world*" (KSA 13:25[19]).

Although the birds bring Peisetairos to power, the play ends with Peisetairos gaining complete control of Cloudcuckooland, as evidenced by the fact that Peisetairos decides to cook some rebellious birds for his delight (1579–85). The birds themselves seem to have fallen prey to the rhetoric of Peisetairos, whose name means "persuader of companions." For Arrowsmith, Aristophanes wants Athenians to see themselves as the birds, and the point of the play is to warn against ambitious and fast-talking sophists like Peisetairos. I interpret the play differently. I think we are meant to identify with Peisetairos and take pleasure in his rise to power. At the same time, the play is not about the glorification of Peisetairos per se. Instead, a closer reading of the parabasis shows that Eros came before and even gave birth to the birds by mixing with Chaos (695–700). Based on the same principle Peisetairos uses to justify the rule of the birds over the Olympian gods, Eros should, as first-born, rule even over the birds, and a case can be made that *Birds* is just as much about the restoration of Eros as it is about the deification of Peisetairos. That is, Peisetairos can be interpreted as a vehicle through which Eros is established as the god of all gods, a point that, if true, would mark a striking contrast to Plato's demotion of Eros to a mere daimon in the *Symposium*. Here, we might say the same for Nietzsche's 1888 works. That is, the comic hero "Nietzsche," the "divine Hanswurst," is merely a vehicle through which a life-affirming eros or will to power is liberated, expressed, and ultimately affirmed. As Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*, "I am no man, I am dynamite" (EH "Destiny": 1).

5. The Seriousness of Nietzsche's Great Politics

Some may worry that by casting Nietzsche's great politics as part of a Dionysian comedy, I am undermining the seriousness and significance of his great politics and his later works. Comedy and laughter, however, can be quite serious matters. As Nietzsche has Zarathustra remark, it is not by wrath but by laughter that one kills most thoroughly (Z I "Reading and Writing"; Z IV "Ass Festival"), and Nietzsche's mockery of both Jesus and Socrates in his late works plays on longstanding concerns and anxieties about laughter and comedy in the Platonic-Christian tradition. Here, we only need to recall that Plato identifies Aristophanes as Socrates's true accuser in the *Apology*—Meletus is dismissed as frivolous—and he implicitly identifies the slander of Socrates in the *Clouds* as the cause of Socrates's conviction and eventual death. Similarly, Halliwell explains how the mockery of Jesus as "King of the Jews" in the Bible grounds Christianity's long-standing antigelastic tendencies,[46] something more recently thematized in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Nietzsche's Dionysian comedy therefore stands in direct opposition to this tradition, and he employs laughter and comedy to counter and harm the ascetic ideal (GM III:26–27). This explains why Nietzsche's first self-description as the "antichrist" in an 1883 letter to Malwida von Meysenbug is immediately followed by the reminder that we should not forget laughter (KSB 6:400).

We can add to the seriousness of Nietzsche's attempt to revive the fantasy politics of Aristophanes by noting that Plato, too, can be understood as offering a fantasy politics of eros in the *Republic*, which may have been designed to counter the fantasy politics of Aristophanes's *Birds*. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche cryptically remarks that a volume of Aristophanes was under the pillow of Plato's deathbed and that even Plato, who repudiated the comedian, could not have endured life without an Aristophanes (BGE 28). As I have argued elsewhere, there are reasons

46 Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 471.

for thinking that Plato is targeting Aristophanes's Peisetairos when he subjects the eros-driven tyrant in *Republic* IX to a scathing critique.[47] Plato's critique is part of a larger (comic) agon, or contest, that he constructs in the *Republic* between the life and eros of the philosopher and the life and eros of the tyrant, and it is this contest of lives that morphs into a contest of corresponding political regimes. However, when Socrates is asked to give more details about this *kallipolis* in *Republic* V, Plato has Socrates present three "ridiculous" proposals that threaten to overwhelm Socrates with waves of laughter. There has been much discussion about the way in which Plato is potentially borrowing from Aristophanic comedy—in particular the *Assemblywomen*—in constructing a city that banishes the love of one's own in calling for a communism of women and children.[48] The greatest of these three waves of laughter is Plato's famous claim that philosophers must become kings (or kings become philosophers), a proposal that parallels Peisetairos's own rise to power. Nevertheless, there is one important difference: whereas Peisetairos wants to rule his Cloudcuckooland, Plato's philosopher kings have little interest in ruling the *kallipolis*.

This, of course, is not the place to develop such a reading of the *Republic*. My point here is that such a reading, if plausible, would further attest to the significance and seriousness of Nietzsche's own fantasy politics. That is, Nietzsche's fantasy politics is both part of a larger attempt to revive Dionysian comedy and a response to Plato's *Republic*, which itself would be a response to Aristophanic comedy. Although Aristophanes's Cloudcuckooland and Plato's *kallipolis* are meant to be ridiculous, at least in the sense that they contradict standing conventions and engage in utopian fantasy, they nevertheless have a serious point. These political

47 Matthew Meyer, "Peisetairos of Aristophanes' *Birds* and the Erotic Tyrant of *Republic* IX," in *The Political Theory of Aristophanes: Explorations in Poetic Wisdom*, eds. Jeremy J. Mhire and Bryan-Paul Frost (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), 275–302.

48 Although it is not clear if Plato borrowed from Aristophanes or Aristophanes borrowed from Plato or both borrowed from some other source or sources. What is clear is that there are enough parallels between the two proposals to generate discussion about their relationship. For remarks along these lines, see Halliwell, *Aristophanes: Birds*, 148.

fantasies are the products of an underlying psychology, and the question at stake in both Plato's *Republic* and Nietzsche's post-*Zarathustra* works is the kind of psychology and the kind of eros we want to cultivate in human beings. For Plato, it is a choice between a non-possessive eros directed toward the Form of the Good and a possessive eros that wants to establish itself as the source of value and the measure of all things. For Nietzsche, there is no such choice. Plato's ascetic will to truth, like Christian agape, is just another form of the will to power or *eros tyrannos*, although it is a sick and self-destructive form of eros that ultimately culminates in nihilism. To avoid this result and overcome this sickness, Nietzsche believes that we need to restore a good conscience to the kind of eros he associates with both Aristophanes and Dionysus and ultimately cultivate individuals, like himself, who are ready and willing to be "rulers of the earth." This is the essence of his great politics.