

Aristophanes

# Birds



Translated by Ian Johnston

Aristophanes  
Birds

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by  
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Birds

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Translator's Note

Note that in the following translation the normal line numbers refer to this text, while the numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text. In numbering the lines, the translator has normally counted a short indented line with the short line above, so that the two short lines count as a single line.

The translator would like to acknowledge the help he received from the notes in Alan H. Sommerstein's edition of *Birds* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1987).

Historical Note

*Birds* was first produced at the drama festival in 414 BC, where it won second prize. At this period, during the Peloponnesian War, Athens was very powerful and confident, having just launched the expedition to Sicily, fully expecting to triumph in that venture and in the larger war.

## Birds

### Dramatis Personae

PISTHETAIROS: a middle-aged Athenian  
EUELPIDES: a middle-aged Athenian  
SERVANT-BIRD: a slave serving Tereus, once a man  
TEREUS: a hoopoe bird, once a man  
FLAMINGO  
PEACOCK  
A SECOND HOOPOE  
GLUTTON-BIRD: a fictitious species  
CHORUS LEADER  
CHORUS: of birds  
XANTHIAS: slave serving Pisthetairos  
MANODOROS: slave serving Euelpides, also called MANES  
PROCNE: a nightingale with a woman's body, consort of Tereus  
PRIEST  
POET  
ORACLE MONGER: a collector and interpreter of oracles  
METON: a land surveyor  
COMMISSIONER OF COLONIES: an Athenian official  
STATUTE SELLER: a man who sells laws  
FIRST MESSENGER: a construction-worker bird  
SECOND MESSENGER: a soldier bird  
IRIS: messenger goddess, daughter of Zeus  
FIRST HERALD: a bird  
YOUNG MAN: young Athenian who wants to beat up his father  
CINESIAS: a very bad dithyrambic poet and singer  
SYCOPHANT: a common informer  
PROMETHEUS: the Titan  
POSEIDON: god of the sea, brother of Zeus  
HERCULES: the legendary hero, now divine  
TRIBALLIAN GOD: an uncouth barbarian god

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PRINCESS: a divine young lady  
SECOND HERALD  
SLAVES attending Pisthetairos.

*[Scene: a rugged, treed wilderness area up in the rocky hills. Enter Pisthetairos and Euelpides, both very tired. They are clambering down from the rocky heights towards the level stage. Pisthetairos has a crow perched on his arm or shoulder, and Euelpides has a jackdaw. Both Pisthetairos and Euelpides are carrying packs on their back. They are followed by two slaves carrying more bags. The slaves stay well out of the way until they get involved in the action later on.]*

EUELPIDES: *[speaking to the bird he is carrying]*  
Are you telling us to keep going straight ahead?  
Over there by that tree?

PISTHETAIROS

Blast this bird—  
it's croaking for us to head back, go home.

EUELPIDES

Why are we wandering up and down like this?  
You're such a fool—this endless weaving round  
will kill us both.

PISTHETAIROS

I must be an idiot  
to keep hiking on along these pathways,  
a hundred miles at least, and just because  
that's what this crow keeps telling me to do.

EUELPIDES

What about me? My poor toe nails are thrashed. 10  
I've worn them out because I'm following  
what this jackdaw says.

PISTHETAIROS *[looking around]*

I've no idea  
where on earth we are.

EUELPIDES

You mean from here

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you couldn't make it back to your place?

[10]

PISTHETAIROS

No way—not even Execestides  
could manage that.<sup>1</sup>

EUELPIDES

We're in a real mess.

PISTHETAIROS

Well, you could try going along that pathway.

*[The two men start exploring different paths down to opposite sides of the stage]*

EUELPIDES

We two were conned by that Philokrates,  
the crazy vendor in the marketplace  
who sells those trays of birds. He claimed these two 20  
would take us straight to Tereus the hoopoe,  
a man who years ago became a bird.  
That's why we paid an obol for this one,  
this jackdaw, son of Tharrelleides.<sup>2</sup>  
and three more for the crow. And then what?  
The two know nothing, except how to bite.

*[The jackdaw with Euelpides begins to get excited about something. Euelpides talks to the bird]*

What's got your attention now? In those rocks?  
You want to take us there? There's no way through.

[20]

<sup>1</sup> *Execestides*: An Athenian descended from Carian slaves and therefore not entitled to be a citizen. The point is that he must have been very skillful to get to Athens, given where he started, and even he couldn't find his way back to Athens.

<sup>2</sup> *Tereus*: the name of a mythological king of Thrace who married Procne and raped her sister Philomela. The sisters killed his son and fed Tereus the flesh for dinner. All three were changed into birds: Tereus into a hoopoe, Procne into a nightingale, and Philomela into a swallow. *Tharrelleides*: the reference here seems to be to a well-known member of the audience, perhaps celebrated for his small size and loud voice.

PISTHETAIROS [*calling across the stage to Euelpides*]  
By god, the same thing over here, no road.

EUELPIDES

What's your crow saying about the pathway? 30

PISTHETAIROS

By god, it's not cawing what it did before.

EUELPIDES

But what's it saying about the road?

PISTHETAIROS

Nothing—  
it's saying nothing, just keeps on croaking—  
something about biting my fingers off.

EUELPIDES [*addressing the audience*]

Don't you think it's really odd the two of us,  
ready and eager to head off for the birds,<sup>1</sup>  
just can't find the way. You see, we're not well.

All you men sitting there to hear our words, [30]

we're ill with a disease, not like the one  
which Sacas suffers, no—the opposite.<sup>2</sup> 40

He's no true citizen, yet nonetheless  
he's pushing his way in by force, but we,  
both honoured members of our tribe and clan,<sup>3</sup>  
both citizens among you citizens,

with no one trying to drive us from the city,  
have winged our way out of our native land  
on our two feet. We don't hate the city  
because we think it's not by nature great  
and truly prosperous—open to all,  
so they can spend their money paying fines. 50

Cicadas chirp up in the trees a while,  
a month or two, but our Athenians [40]

<sup>1</sup> *birds*: the Greek expression is “to the Ravens,” meaning “go to hell.”

<sup>2</sup> *Sacas*: a name for Acestor, a foreign-born tragic dramatist.

<sup>3</sup> *tribe and clan*: the political units of Athenian civic life.

keep chirping over lawsuits all their lives.  
That's why right now we've set off on this trip,  
with all this stuff—basket, pot, and myrtle boughs.<sup>1</sup>  
We're looking for a nice relaxing spot,  
where we can settle down, live out our lives.  
We're heading for Tereus, that hoopoe bird—  
we'd like to know if in his flying around  
he's seen a city like the one we want.

60

PISTHETAIROS

Hey!

EUELPIDES

What?

PISTHETAIROS

My crow keeps cawing upwards—  
up there.

EUELPIDES

My jackdaw's looking up there, too,  
as if it wants to show me something.  
There must be birds around these rocks. I know—  
let's make noise and then we'll see for sure.

[50]

PISTHETAIROS

You know what you should do? Kick that outcrop.

EUELPIDES

Why not use your head? There'd be twice the noise.

*[Pisthetairos and Euelpides start climbing back up the rocky outcrops  
towards what looks like a door in the middle of the rocks]*

PISTHETAIROS

Pick up a stone and then knock on the door.

EUELPIDES

All right. Here I go.

<sup>4</sup> *basket, pot, and myrtle boughs*: these materials were necessary to conduct the sacrifices at the founding of a new city.

*[Euelpides picks up a stone, hits the door very hard, and calls out]*

Hey, boy . . . boy!

PISTHETAIROS

What are you saying? Why call the hoopoe “boy”? 70  
Don’t say that—you should call out

*[giving a bird call]*

“Hoopoe-ho!”

EUELPIDES *[knocking on the door and calling again]*

Hoopoe-ho! . . . Should I knock again? . . . Hoopoe-ho!

SERVANT-BIRD *[inside]*

Who is it? Who’s shouting for my master? [60]

*[The door opens and an actor-bird emerges. He has a huge beak which terrifies Euelpides and Pisthetairos. They fall back in fear, and the birds they have been carrying disappear]*

EUELPIDES

My lord Apollo, save us! That gaping beak—

SERVANT-BIRD *[also frightened]*

Oh, oh, now we’re in for it. You two men,  
you’re bird-catchers!

EUELPIDES

Don’t act so weird!

Can’t you say something nice?

SERVANT-BIRD *[trying to scare them off]*

You two men will die!

EUELPIDES

But we’re not men.

SERVANT-BIRD

What? What are you, then?

EUELPIDES

Well . . . I’m a chicken-shitter . . . a Libyan bird . . .

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SERVANT-BIRD

That's rubbish.

EUELPIDES

No, it's not—I've just dropped my load—  
down both legs. Take a look. 80

SERVANT-BIRD

And this one here?

What kind of bird is he?

*[to Pisthetairos]*

Can you speak?

PISTHETAIROS

Me? . . . I'm a crapper-fowl . . . from Phasis.

EUELPIDES

By god, what kind of animal are you?

SERVANT-BIRD

I'm a servant bird.

EUELPIDES

Beaten by some rooster  
in a cock fight? [70]

SERVANT-BIRD

No. It was my master—  
when he became a hoopoe, well, I prayed  
that I could turn into a bird. That way  
he'd still have me to serve and wait on him.

EUELPIDES

Does a bird need his own butler bird? 90

SERVANT-BIRD

He does—I think it's got something to do  
with the fact that earlier he was a man.  
So if he wants to taste some fish from Phalerum,  
I grab a plate and run off for sardines.  
If he wants soup, we need pot and ladle,

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so I dash off for the spoon.

EUELPIDES

A runner bird—  
that's what you are. Well, my little runner,  
do you know what we'd like to have you do?  
Go call your master for us.

[80]

SERVANT-BIRD

But he's asleep,  
for heaven's sake, his after-dinner snooze—  
he's just had gnats and myrtle berries.

100

EUELPIDES

Wake him up anyway.

SERVANT-BIRD

I know for sure  
he'll be annoyed, but I'll do it, just for you.

*[Exit Servant-Bird back through the doors]*

PISTHETAIROS

Damn that bird—he scared me half to death.

EUELPIDES

Bloody hell—he frightened off my bird!

PISTHETAIROS

You're such a coward—the worst there is.  
Were you so scared you let that jackdaw go?

EUELPIDES

What about you? Didn't you collapse  
and let your crow escape?

PISTHETAIROS

Not me, by god.

EUELPIDES

Where is it then?

PISTHETAIROS

It flew off on its own.

110

[90]

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EUELPIDES

You didn't let go? What a valiant man!

TEREUS [*from inside, speaking in a grand style*]

Throw open this wood, so I may issue forth.

*[The doors open. Enter Tereus, a hoopoe bird, with feathers on his head and wings but none on his body. He struts and speaks with a ridiculously affected confidence. Euelpides and Pisthetairos are greatly amused at his appearance]*

EUELPIDES

Oh Hercules, what kind of beast is this?  
What's that plumage? What sort of triple crest?

TEREUS

Who are the persons here who seek me out?

EUELPIDES

The twelve gods, it seems, have worked you over.<sup>1</sup>

TEREUS

Does seeing my feathers make you scoff at me?  
Strangers, I was once upon a time a man.

EUELPIDES

It's not you we're laughing at.

TEREUS

Then what is it?

EUELPIDES

It's your beak—to us it looks quite funny. 120

TEREUS

It's how Sophocles distorts Tereus— [100]  
that's me—in his tragedies.

EUELPIDES

You're Tereus?

<sup>1</sup> *twelve gods*: the major Olympian deities, headed by Zeus.

Are you a peacock or a bird? <sup>1</sup>

TEREUS

I am a bird.

EUELPIDES

Then where are all your feathers?

TEREUS

They've fallen off.

EUELPIDES

Have you got some disease?

TEREUS

No, it's not that.

In winter time all birds shed their feathers,  
then new ones grow again. But tell me this—  
who are the two of you?

EUELPIDES

Us? We're human beings.

TEREUS

From what race were you born?

EUELPIDES

Our origin?

In Athens—which makes the finest warships.

130

TEREUS

Ah, so you're jury-men, are you?

EUELPIDES

No, no.

We're different—we keep away from juries.

TEREUS

Does that seedling flourish in those parts?

[110]

EUELPIDES

If you go searching in the countryside,

<sup>1</sup>Most Athenians knew very little about peacocks.

you'll find a few.

TEREUS

So why have you come here?  
What do you need?

EUELPIDES

To talk to you.

TEREUS

What for?

EUELPIDES

Well, you were once a man, as we are now.  
You owed people money, as we do now.  
You loved to skip the debt, as we do now.  
Then you changed your nature, became a bird. 140  
You fly in circles over land and sea.  
You've learned whatever's known to birds and men.  
That's why we've come as suppliants to you, [120]  
to ask if you can tell us of some town,  
where life is sheepskin soft, where we can rest.

TEREUS

Are you looking for a mighty city,  
more powerful than what Cranaus built?<sup>1</sup>

EUELPIDES

Not one more powerful, no. What we want  
is one which better suits the two of us.

TEREUS

You clearly want an aristocracy. 150

EUELPIDES

Me? No, not at all. The son of Scellias  
is someone I detest.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Cranaus*: a reference to a mythological king who founded Athens or a word derived from *kranos*, meaning rugged, a word often applied to Athens.

<sup>2</sup>*son of Scellias*: This is a reference is to a man called Aristocrates, an important politician-soldier in Athens.

TEREUS

All right, then,  
What kind of city would you like to live in?

EUELPIDES

I'd like a city where my biggest problem  
would be something like this—in the morning  
a friend comes to my door and says to me,  
"In the name of Olympian Zeus, take a bath, [130]  
an early one, you and your children,  
then come to my place for the wedding feast  
I'm putting on. Don't disappoint me now. 160  
If you do, then don't come looking for me  
when my affairs get difficult for me."<sup>1</sup>

TEREUS

By heaven, you poor man, you do love trouble.  
What about you?

PISTHETAIROS

I'd like the same.

TEREUS

Like what?

PISTHETAIROS

To have the father of some handsome lad  
come up to me, as if I'd done him wrong,  
and tell me off with some complaint like this—  
"A fine thing there between you and my son, [140]  
you old lecher. You met him coming back  
from the gymnasium, after his bath— 170  
you didn't kiss or greet him with a hug,  
or even try tickling his testicles—  
yet you're a friend of mine, his father."

<sup>2</sup> *difficult for me*: This is a utopian fantasy because the neighbour is suggesting that, as a punishment, his friend Euelpides would not have to help him if he gets in financial trouble, even though he's invited him to an important family celebration.

TEREUS

How you yearn for problems, you unhappy man.  
There is a carefree city by the sea,  
the Red Sea, just like the one you mention.<sup>1</sup>

EUELPIDES

No, no. Not by the sea! That's not for us,  
not where that ship Salamia can show up  
with some man on board to serve a summons  
early in the morning. What about Greece?  
Can you tell us of some city there?<sup>2</sup>

180

TEREUS

Why not go and settle down in Elis—  
in Lepreus?

EUELPIDES

In Lepreus? By the gods,  
I hate the place—although I've never seen it—  
it's all Melanthius' fault.<sup>3</sup>

[150]

TEREUS

You could go  
to the Opuntians—they're in Locris—  
you might settle there.

EUELPIDES

Be Opuntius—  
no way, not for a talent's weight in gold.<sup>4</sup>  
But what's it like here, living with the birds?  
You must know it well.

<sup>1</sup>*Red Sea*: a general term for any sea by the southern coasts of Asia.

<sup>2</sup>*summons*: Athenian citizens could be legally summoned home for trial. Salamia was an official ship often used for such voyages.

<sup>3</sup>*Melanthius' fault*: The reference is to an Athenian tragic dramatist who had a very bad skin condition (making him look as if he had leprosy).

<sup>4</sup>*Opuntius*: a widely disliked Athenian legal informant. A talent's weight is just under 30 kilograms.

TEREUS

It's not unpleasant.  
First of all, you have to live without a purse.

190

EUELPIDES

So you're rid of one great source of fraud in life.

TEREUS

In the gardens we enjoy white sesame,  
the myrtles, mint, and poppies.

[160]

EUELPIDES

So you live  
just like newly-weds.

PISTHETAIROS [*very excited*]

That's it! I've got it!  
I see a great plan for this race of birds—  
and power, too, if you'll trust what I say.

TEREUS

What do you want to get us all to do?

PISTHETAIROS

What should you be convinced to do? Well, first,  
don't just fly about in all directions,  
your beaks wide open—that makes you despised.  
With us, you see, if you spoke of men  
who always flit about and if you asked,  
"Who's that Teleas" someone would respond,  
"The man's a bird—he's unreliable,  
flighty, vague, never stays in one place long."<sup>1</sup>

200

[170]

TEREUS

By Dionysus, that's a valid point—  
the criticism's fair. What should we do?

PISTHETAIROS

Settle down together in one city.

TEREUS

<sup>2</sup> *Teleus*. Athenian politician with a reputation for being unpredictable.

What sort of city could we birds set up?

210

PISTHETAIROS

Why ask that? What a stupid thing to say!  
Look down.

TEREUS

All right.

PISTHETAIROS

Now look up.

TEREUS

I'm looking up.

PISTHETAIROS

Turn your head round to the side.

TEREUS

By Zeus,  
this'll do me good, if I twist off my neck.

PISTHETAIROS

What do you see?

TEREUS

Clouds and sky.

PISTHETAIROS

Well, then,  
isn't this a staging area for birds?

TEREUS

A staging area? How come it's that?

PISTHETAIROS

You might say it's a location for them—  
there's lots of business here, but everything  
keeps moving through this zone, so it's now called  
a staging place. But if you settled here,  
fortified it, and fenced it off with walls,  
this staging area could become your state.  
Then you'd rule all men as if they're locusts

[180]

220

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and annihilate the gods with famine,  
just like in Melos.<sup>1</sup>

TEREUS

How'd we manage that?

PISTHETAIROS

Look, between earth and heaven there's the air.  
Now, with us, when we want to go to Delphi,  
we have to ask permission to pass through  
from the Boeotians. You should do the same.  
When men sacrifice, make gods pay you cash.  
If not, you don't grant them rights of passage.  
You'll stop the smell of roasting thigh bones  
moving through an empty space and city  
which don't belong to them.

230

[190]

TEREUS

Wow!!! Yippee!!

By earth, snares, traps, nets, what a marvellous scheme!  
I've never heard a neater plan! So now,  
with your help, I'm going to found a city,  
if other birds agree.

PISTHETAIROS

The other birds?

Who's going to lay this business out to them?

240

TEREUS

You can do it. I've taught them how to speak.  
Before I came, they could only twitter,  
but I've been with them here a long, long time.

[200]

PISTHETAIROS

How do you call to bring them all together?

TEREUS

Easy. I'll step inside my thicket here,  
and wake my nightingale. Then we'll both call.

<sup>1</sup>*Melos*: the Athenians committed a horrible atrocity during the Peloponnesian War, starving the population of Melos and then executing all male citizens.

Once they hear our voices they'll come running.

PISTHETAIROS

Oh, you darling bird, now don't just stand there—  
not when I'm begging you to go right now,  
get in your thicket, wake your nightingale.

250

*[Tereus goes back through the doors]*<sup>1</sup>

TEREUS *[singing]*

Come my queen, don't sleep so long,  
pour forth the sound of sacred song—  
lament once more through lips divine  
for Itys, your dead child and mine,  
the one we've cried for all this time.<sup>2</sup>  
Sing out your music's liquid trill  
in that vibrato voice — the thrill  
which echoes in those purest tones  
through leafy haunts of yew trees roams  
and rises up to Zeus' throne.  
Apollo with the golden hair  
sits listening to your music there —  
and in response he plucks his strings —  
his lyre of ivory then brings  
the gods themselves to dance and sing,  
and from gods' mouths in harmony  
come sounds of sacred melody.

[210]

260

[220]

*[A flute starts playing within, in imitation of the nightingale's song.  
The melody continues for a few moments]*

EUELPIDES

By lord Zeus, that little birdie's got a voice!  
She pours her honey all through that thicket!

<sup>1</sup>In some productions of *Birds* the set design permits the audience to see inside Tereus' quarters, so that the singer of the songs which follow remains visible to the audience. Alternatively, Tereus could move out onto a rocky balcony to deliver his song. It seems dramatically very weak to have him deliver these lyrics out of sight of the audience.

<sup>2</sup>*Itys*: son of Tereus and Procne, killed by his mother, who served him up as dinner, in revenge for Tereus' rape and mutilation of her sister.

PISTHETAIROS

Hey!

EUELPIDES

What?

PISTHETAIROS

Shut up!

EUELPIDES

Why?

PISTHETAIROS

That hoopoe bird—

270

he's all set to sing another song.

*[Tereus starts issuing a bird call to all the birds. His song or chant is accompanied by the flute indicating the nightingale's song]*

TEREUS

Epo-popo-popo-popo-popoi,

Io, io, ito, ito, ito, ito.

Come here to me,

all you with feathers just like mine,

[230]

all you who live in country fields

fresh-ploughed, still full of seed,

and all you thousand tribes

who munch on barley corn

who gather up the grain,

280

and fly at such a speed

and utter your sweet cries,

all you who in the furrows there

twitter on the turned-up earth,

and sweetly sing

tio tio tio tio tio tio tio tio—

All those of you

who like to scavenge food

from garden ivy shoots,

[240]

all you in the hills up there

290

who eat from olive and arbutus trees.

come here as quickly as you can,

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fly here in answer to this call—  
trio-to trio-to toto-brix!

And every one of you  
in low-lying marshy ground  
who snap sharp-biting gnats,  
by regions of well-watered land,  
and lovely fields of Marathon,  
all you variously coloured birds,  
godwits and francolins—

300

I'm summoning you.

You flocks who fly across the seas  
across the waves with halcyons  
come here to learn the news.

[250]

We're all assembling here,  
all tribes of long-neck birds.  
A shrewd old man's arrived—  
he's here with a new plan,  
a man of enterprise,  
all set to improvise.  
So gather all of you  
to hear his words.

310

*[The final words gradually change from coherent speech into a bird call]*

Come here, come here,  
come here, come here.  
Toro-toro toro-toro-tix  
Kik-kabau, kik-kabau.  
Toro-toro toro-toro li-li-lix

[260]

*[Euelpides and Pisthetairos start looking up into the sky for birds]*

PISTHETAIROS

Seen any birds lately?

EUELPIDES

No, by Apollo, I haven't—  
even though I'm staring up into the sky,  
not even blinking.

320

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PISTHETAIROS

It seems to me  
that hoopoe bird was just wasting time  
hiding, like a curlew, in that thicket,  
screaming bird calls—

*[imitating Tereus]*

Po-poi po-poi!

*[There is an instant response to Pisthetairos' call from off-stage, a loud bird call which really scares Pisthetairos and Euelpides]*

BIRD *[offstage]*

Toro-tix, toro-tix!

PISTHETAIROS

Hey, my good man, here comes a bird.

*[Enter a flamingo, very tall and flaming red, something Pisthetairos and Euelpides have never seen]*

EUELPIDES

By Zeus,  
that's a bird? What kind would you call that?  
It couldn't be a peacock, could it?

*[Tereus re-enters from the thicket]*

PISTHETAIROS

Tereus here will tell us. Hey, my friend,  
what's that bird there?

TEREUS

Not your everyday fowl—  
the kind you always see. She's a marsh bird.

330 [270]

EUELPIDES

My goodness, she's gorgeous—flaming red!

TEREUS

Naturally, that's why she's called Flamingo.

*[A second bird enters, a Peacock]*

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EUELPIDES [*to Pisthetairos*]

Hey . . .

PISTHETAIROS

What is it?

EUELPIDES

Another bird's arrived.

PISTHETAIROS

You're right. By god, this one looks really odd.

[*to Tereus*]

Who's this bizarre bird-prophet of the Muse,  
this strutter from the hills?

TEREUS

He's called the Mede.

PISTHETAIROS

He's a Mede? By lord Hercules, how come  
a Mede flew here without his camel?

EUELPIDES

Here's another one . . .

[*The next bird enters, another Hoopoe*]

. . . what a crest of feathers!

PISTHETAIROS [*to Tereus*]

What's this marvel? You're not the only hoopoe?  
This here's another one?

340 [280]

TEREUS

He's my grandson—  
son of Philocles the Hoopoe—it's like  
those names you pass along, when you call  
Hipponicus the son of Callias,

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and Callias son of Hipponicus.<sup>1</sup>

PISTHETAIROS

So this bird is Callias. His feathers—  
he seems to have lost quite a few.

TEREUS

Yes, that's true—  
being a well-off bird he's plucked by parasites,  
and female creatures flock around him, too,  
to yank his plumage out.

*[Enter the Glutton-bird, an invented species, very fat and brightly coloured]*

PISTHETAIROS

By Poseidon, 350  
here's another bright young bird. What's it called?

TEREUS

This one's the Glutton-bird.

PISTHETAIROS

Another glutton?  
Cleonymus is not the only one?<sup>2</sup>

EUELPIDES

If this bird were like our Cleonymus, [290]  
wouldn't he have thrown away his crest?

PISTHETAIROS

Why do all the birds display such head crests?  
Are they going to run a race in armour?

TEREUS

No, my dear fellow, they live up on the crests,

<sup>1</sup>*Hipponicus*: this passage refers to the Greek custom of naming children after their grandfathers. Philocles was a tragic dramatist. Callias, his son, was a notorious spendthrift who squandered his family inheritance on a debauched lifestyle.

<sup>2</sup>*Cleonymus*: an Athenian politician well known for his gluttonous eating habits and his size. He also reputedly once threw his shield away in battle and ran off.

because it's safer, like the Carians.<sup>1</sup>

PISTHETAIROS [*looking offstage*]

Holy Poseidon, do you see those birds!

360

What a fowl bunch of them—all flocking here!

EUELPIDES [*looking in the same direction*]

Lord Apollo, there's a huge bird cloud! Wow!

So many feathered wings in there I can't see  
a way through all those feathers to the wings.

[*Enter the Chorus of Birds in a dense mass. Pisthetairos and Euelpides  
clamber up the rock to get a better look at them*]

PISTHETAIROS

Hey, look—

it's a partridge, and that one over there,  
by Zeus, a francolin—there's a widgeon—  
and that's a halcyon!

EUELPIDES

What's the one behind her?

PISTHETAIROS

What is it? It's a spotted shaver.

EUELPIDES

A shaver?

You mean there's a bird that cuts our hair?

PISTHETAIROS

Why not?

After all, there's that barber in the city—  
the one we all call Sparrow Sporgilos.<sup>2</sup>

370

Here comes an owl.

[300]

<sup>2</sup>*safer*. Pisthetairos refers to a race in which the runners wore helmets with plumes (crests), but Tereus misunderstands and talks about mountain crests where the birds live. Caria is in Asia Minor.

<sup>1</sup>*shaver*: the Greek bird *kerulos* was a mythological species. The passage here plays on the similarity of the verb *keirein* meaning to cut hair.

EUELPIDES

Well, what about that?  
Who brings owls to Athens? <sup>1</sup>

PISTHETAIROS [*identifying birds in the crowd*]

... a turtle dove,  
a jay, lark, sedge bird ...

EUELPIDES

... finch, pigeon ...

PISTHETAIROS

... falcon,  
hawk, ring dove ...

EUELPIDES

... cuckoo, red shank ...

PISTHETAIROS

... fire-crest ...

EUELPIDES

... porphyrion, kestrel, dabchick, bunting,  
vulture, and that one's there's a ... [*he's stumped*]

PISTHETAIROS

... woodpecker!!

EUELPIDES

What a crowd of birds! A major flock of fowls!  
All that twitter as they prance around,  
those rival cries! ... Oh, oh, what's going on?  
Are they a threat? They're looking straight at us—  
their beaks are open!

380

PISTHETAIROS

It looks that way to me.

CHORUS LEADER [*starting with a bird call*]

To-toto-to to-toto-to to-to.

[310]

<sup>2</sup>*Athens*. Bringing owls to Athens is an expression for an unnecessary action, as in "bringing coals to Newcastle."

Who's been calling me?  
Where's he keep his nest?

TEREUS

I'm the one. I've been waiting here a while.  
I've not left my bird friends in the lurch.

CHORUS LEADER

Ti-tit-ti ti-tit-ti ti-ti-ti—  
tell me as a friend what you have to say.

TEREUS

I have news for all of us—something safe,  
judicious, sweet, and profitable. 390  
Two men have just come here to visit me,  
two subtle thinkers . . .

CHORUS LEADER [*interrupting*]

What? What are you saying?

TEREUS

I'm telling you two old men have arrived—  
they've come from lands where human beings live [320]  
and bring the stalk of a stupendous plan.

CHORUS LEADER

You fool! This is the most disastrous thing  
since I was hatched. What are you telling us?

TEREUS

Don't be afraid of what I have to say.

CHORUS LEADER

What have you done to us?

TEREUS

I've welcomed here  
two men in love with our society. 400

CHORUS LEADER

You dared to do that?

TEREUS

Yes, indeed, I did.  
And I'm very pleased I did so.

CHORUS LEADER

These two men of yours,  
are they among us now?

TEREUS

Yes, as surely as I am.

CHORUS [*breaking into a song of indignation*]

Aiiii, aiiii

He's cheated us,  
he's done us wrong.

That friend of ours,

who all along

has fed with us

410

in fields we share,

[330]

now breaks old laws

and doesn't care.

We swore a pact

of all the birds.

He's now trapped us  
with deceitful words—

so power goes

to all our foes,

that wicked race

420

which since its birth

was raised for war

with us on earth.

CHORUS LEADER

We'll have some words with that one later.

These two old men should get their punishment—

I think we should give it now. Let's do it—

rip them to pieces, bit by bit.

PISTHETAIROS

We're done for.

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EUELPIDES

It's all your fault—getting us into this mess.  
Why'd you bring me here?

PISTHETAIROS

I wanted you to come. [340]

EUELPIDES

What? So I could weep myself to death? 430

PISTHETAIROS

Now, you're really talking nonsense—  
how do you intend to weep, once these birds  
poke out your eyes?

CHORUS [*advancing towards Pisthetairos and Euelpides*]

On, on . . .

let's move in to attack,  
and launch a bloody rush,  
come in from front and back,  
and break them in the crush—  
with wings on every side  
they'll have no place to hide.  
These two will start to howl, 440  
when my beak starts to eat  
and makes them food for fowl.

There's no well-shaded peak,  
no cloud or salt-grey sea [350]  
where they can flee from me.

CHORUS LEADER

Now let's bite and tear these two apart!  
Where's the brigadier? Bring up the right wing!

*[The birds start to close in on Pisthetairos and Euelpides, cowering up on the rocks]*

EUELPIDES

This is it! I'm done for. Where can I run?

PISTHETAIROS

Why aren't you staying put?

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EUELPIDES

Here with you?

I don't want them to rip me into pieces.

450

PISTHETAIROS

How do you intend to get away from them?

EUELPIDES

I haven't a clue.

PISTHETAIROS

Then I'll tell you how—

we have to stay right here and fight it out.

So take this cauldron.

*[Pisthetairos takes a cauldron out of their baggage and gives it to Euelpides]*

EUELPIDES

What good's a cauldron?

PISTHETAIROS

It'll keep the owls away from us.

EUELPIDES

What about the birds with claws?

PISTHETAIROS *[producing a barbecue spit]*

Grab this spit—

stick it in the ground in front of you.

EUELPIDES

How do we protect our eyes?

[360]

PISTHETAIROS *[producing a couple of tin bowls]*

An upturned bowl.

Set this on your head.

*[Euelpides puts the tin bowl upside down on his head and holds up the pot, with the spit stuck in the ground]*

EUELPIDES

That's brilliant!

What a grand stroke of warlike strategy!

460

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In military matters you're the best—  
already smarter than that Nikias.<sup>1</sup>

*[Pisthetairos and Euelpides, with tin bowls on their heads, await the birds' charge, with Pisthetairos hiding behind Euelpides who is holding up the big pot. Their two slaves cower behind them]*

CHORUS LEADER

El-el-el-eu . . . Charge!

Keep those beaks level—no holding back now!  
Pull them, scratch them, hit them, rip their skins off!  
Go smash that big pot first of all.

*[As the Chorus is about to start its charge, Tereus rushes in between the two men and the Chorus and tries to stop the Chorus Leader]*

TEREUS

Hold on, you wickedest of animals!  
Tell me this: Why do you want to kill these men,  
to tear them both to bits? They've done no wrong.  
Besides, they're my wife's relatives, her clansmen.

CHORUS LEADER

Why should we be more merciful to them 470  
than we are to wolves? What other animals  
are greater enemies of ours than them?  
Have we got better targets for revenge? [370]

TEREUS

Yes, by nature enemies—but what if  
they've got good intentions? What if they've come  
to teach you something really valuable?

CHORUS LEADER

How could they ever teach us anything,  
or tell us something useful—they're enemies,  
our feathered forefathers' fierce foes.

TEREUS

But folks with fine minds find from foemen 480

<sup>1</sup>*Nikias*: Athenian general famous for his tactical skill.

they can learn a lot. Caution saves us all.  
We don't learn that from friends. But enemies  
can force that truth upon us right away.  
That's why cities learn, not from their allies,  
but from enemies, how to build high walls,  
assemble fleets of warships—in that way,  
their knowledge saves their children, homes, and goods. [380]

CHORUS LEADER

Well, here's what seems best to me—first of all,  
let's hear what they have come to say. It's true—  
our enemies can teach us something wise. 490

PISTHETAIROS [*to Euelpides*]

I think their anger's easing off. Let's retreat.

*[Pisthetairos and Euelpides inch their way toward the doors, still  
bunched together, with Euelpides holding up the pot]*

TEREUS [*to the Chorus Leader*]

It's only fair—and you do owe me a favour,  
out of gratitude.

CHORUS LEADER

In other things,  
before today, we've never stood against you.

PISTHETAIROS

They're acting now more peacefully to us—  
so put that pot and bowl down on the ground.  
But we'd better hang onto the spit, our spear.  
We'll use it on patrol inside our camp [390]  
right by this cauldron here. Keep your eyes peeled—  
don't even think of running off from here. 500

*[Euelpides puts down the cauldron, removes his tin-plate helmet, and  
marches with the spear back and forth by the cauldron, on guard]*

EUELPIDES

What happens if we're killed? Where on earth  
will we be buried?

PISTHETAIROS

In Kerameikos—  
where the potters live—they'll bury both of us.  
We'll get it done and have the public pay—  
I'll tell the generals we died in battle,  
fighting with the troops at Orneai.<sup>1</sup>

CHORUS LEADER

Fall back into the ranks you held before. [400]  
Bend over, and like well-armed soldier boys,  
put your spirit and your anger down.  
We'll look into who these two men may be, 510  
where they come from, what their intentions are.

*[The Chorus of Birds breaks up and retreats]*

Hey, Hoopoe bird, I'm calling you!

TEREUS

You called?  
What would you like to hear?

CHORUS LEADER

These two men—  
where do they come from and who are they?

TEREUS

These strangers are from Greece, font of wisdom.

CHORUS LEADER

What accident or words [410]  
now brings them to the birds?

TEREUS

The two men love your life,  
adore the way you live—  
they want to share with you 520  
in all there is to give.

CHORUS LEADER

What's that you just said?

<sup>1</sup>*Orneai*: a siege in which some Athenians took part. There were no casualties.

What plan is in their head?

TEREUS

Things you'd never think about—  
you'll be amazed—just hear him out.

CHORUS LEADER

He thinks it's good that he  
should stay and live with me?  
Is he trusting in some plan  
to help his fellow man  
or thump his enemy?

530 [420]

TEREUS

He talks of happiness  
too great for thought or words  
He claims this emptiness—  
all space—is for the birds—  
here, there, and everywhere.  
You'll be convinced, I swear.

CHORUS LEADER

Is he crazy in the head?

TEREUS

He is shrewder than I said.

CHORUS LEADER

A brilliant thinking box?

TEREUS

The subtlest, sharpest fox,  
he's been around a lot  
knows every scheme and plot.

540

[430]

CHORUS LEADER

Ask him to speak to us, to tell us all.  
As I listen now to what you're telling me,  
it makes me feel like flying—taking off!

TEREUS [*to the two slaves*]

Take their suits of armour in the house—

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hang the stuff up in the kitchen there,  
beside the cauldron—may it bring good luck!

[turning to *Pisthetairos*]

Now you. Lay out your plans—explain to them  
the reason why I called them all together.

550

[*Pisthetairos* is struggling with the servants, refusing to give up his  
armour]

PISTHETAIROS

No. By Apollo, I won't do it—  
not unless they swear a pact with me  
just like one that monkey Panaitios,  
who makes our knives, had his wife swear to him—  
not to bite or pull my balls or poke me.

[440]

CHORUS LEADER

You mean up your . . .

PISTHETAIROS

No, not there. I mean the eyes.

CHORUS LEADER

Oh, I'll agree to that.

PISTHETAIROS

Then swear an oath on it.

CHORUS LEADER

I swear on this condition—that I get  
all the judges' and spectators' votes and win.<sup>1</sup>

PISTHETAIROS

Oh, you'll win!

CHORUS LEADER

And if I break the oath,  
then let me win by just a single vote.  
Listen all of you! The armed infantry  
can now pick up their weapons and go home.

560

<sup>1</sup> *win*: a reference to the fact that *Birds* is competing in a drama festival.

Keep an eye out for any bulletins  
we put up on our notice boards.

[450]

CHORUS

By nature man is born to lie.  
But state your case. Give it a try.  
There's a chance you have observed  
some useful things inside this bird,  
some greater power I possess,  
which my dull brain has never guessed.  
So tell all here just what you see.  
If there's a benefit to me,  
we'll share in it communally.

570

CHORUS LEADER

Tell us the business that's brings you here.  
Persuade us of your views. So speak right up.  
No need to be afraid—we've made a pact—  
we won't be the ones who break it first.

[460]

PISTHETAIROS [*aside to Euelpides*]

By god, I'm full of words, bursting to speak.  
I've worked my speech like well-mixed flour—  
like kneading dough. There's nothing stopping me.

580

*[to the two slaves]*

You, lad, fetch me a speaker's wreath—and, you,  
bring water here, so I can wash my hands.

*[The two slaves go into the house and return with a wreath and some water]*

EUELPIDES [*whispering to Pisthetairos*]

You mean it's time for dinner? What's going on?

PISTHETAIROS

For a long time now I've been keen, by god,  
to give them a stupendous speech—overstuffed—  
something to shake their tiny birdy souls.

*[Pisthetairos, with the wreath on his head, now turns to the birds and*

*begins his formal oration]*

I'm so sorry for you all, who once were kings . . .

CHORUS LEADER

Kings? Us? What of?

PISTHETAIROS

You were kings indeed,  
you ruled over everything there is—  
over him and me, first of all, and then  
over Zeus himself. You see, your ancestry  
goes back before old Cronos and the Titans,  
way back before even Earth herself!<sup>1</sup>

590

CHORUS LEADER

Before the Earth?

PISTHETAIROS

Yes, by Apollo.

CHORUS LEADER

Well, that's something I never knew before!

[470]

PISTHETAIROS

That's because you're naturally uninformed—  
you lack resourcefulness. You've not read Aesop.  
His story tells us that the lark was born  
before the other birds, before the Earth.  
Her father then grew sick and died. For five days  
he lay there unburied—there was no Earth.  
Not knowing what to do, at last the lark,  
at her wits' end, set him in her own head.

600

EUELPIDES

So now, the father of the lark lies dead  
in a headland plot.

PISTHETAIROS

So if they were born

<sup>1</sup>*Earth*: Cronos was the father of Zeus; the Titans were the sons of Earth and Ouranos. Earth was the original mother goddess.

before the Earth, before the gods, well then,  
as the eldest, don't they get the right to rule?

EUELPIDES

By Apollo, yes they do.

*[addressing the audience]*

So you out there,  
look ahead and sprout yourselves a beak— 610  
in good time Zeus will hand his sceptre back [480]  
to the birds who peck his sacred oaks.

PISTHETAIROS

Way back then it wasn't gods who ruled.  
They didn't govern men. No. It was the birds.  
There's lots of proof for this. I'll mention here  
example number one—the fighting cock—  
first lord and king of all those Persians,  
well before the time of human kings—  
those Dariuses and Megabazuses.  
Because he was their king, the cock's still called 620  
the Persian Bird.

EUELPIDES

That's why to this very day  
the cock's the only bird to strut about  
like some great Persian king, and on his head  
he wears his crown erect.

PISTHETAIROS

He was so great,  
so mighty and so strong, that even now,  
thanks to his power then, when he sings out  
his early morning song, all men leap up  
to head for work—blacksmiths, potters, tanners, [490]  
men who deal in corn or supervise the baths,  
or make our shields or fabricate our lyres— 630  
they all lace on their shoes and set off in the dark.

## EUELPIDES

I can vouch for that! I had some bad luck,  
thanks to that cock—I lost my cloak to thieves,  
a soft and warm one, too, of Phrygian wool.  
I'd been invited to a festive do,  
where some child was going to get his name,  
right here in the city. I'd had some drinks—  
and those drinks, well, they made me fall asleep.  
Before the other guests began to eat,  
that bird lets rip his cock-a-doodle-doo!  
I thought it was the early morning call.  
So I run off for Halimus<sup>1</sup>—but then,  
just outside the city walls, I get mugged,  
some coat thief hits me square across the back—  
he used a cudgel! When I fall down there,  
about to cry for help, he steals my cloak!

640

## PISTHETAIROS

To resume—way back then the Kite was king.  
He ruled the Greeks.

## CHORUS LEADER

King of the Greeks!!

## PISTHETAIROS

That's right.

As king he was the first to show us how  
to grovel on the ground before a kite.

[500]

650

## EUELPIDES

By Dionysus, I once saw a kite  
and rolled along the ground, then, on my back,  
my mouth wide open, gulped an obol down.  
I had to trudge home with an empty sack.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Halimus*: a community on the coast near Athens.

<sup>1</sup>*kite*: There was an old Greek custom of saluting the kite as the bird announcing the arrival of spring by rolling on the ground. This speech refers to the habit of carrying small coins in the mouth. Having eaten his money, he can't buy the food he set out to purchase.

PISTHETAIROS

Take Egypt and Phoenicia—they were ruled  
by Cuckoo kings. And when they cried “Cuckooooo!!”  
all those Phoenicians harvested their crop—  
the wheat and barley in their fields.

EUELPIDES

That’s why  
if someone’s cock is ploughing your wife’s field,  
we call you “Cuckoo!”—you’re being fooled!<sup>1</sup> 660

PISTHETAIROS

The kingship of the birds was then so strong  
that in the cities of the Greeks a king—  
an Agamemnon, say, or Menelaus—  
had a bird perched on his regal sceptre.  
And it got its own share of all the gifts  
the king received. [510]

EUELPIDES

Now, that I didn’t know.  
I always get amazed in tragedies  
when some king Priam comes on with a bird.  
I guess it stands on guard there, keeping watch  
to see what presents Lysicrates gets.<sup>2</sup> 670

PISTHETAIROS

Here’s the weirdest proof of all—lord Zeus  
who now commands the sky, because he’s king,  
carries an eagle on his head. There’s more—  
his daughter has an owl, and Apollo,  
like a servant, has a hawk.

EUELPIDES

That’s right,  
by Demeter! What’s the reason for those birds?

PISTHETAIROS

<sup>2</sup>These lines are an attempt to deal with a very obscure sexual pun in the Greek.

<sup>1</sup>*Lysicrates gets*: a reference to a corrupt Athenian politician.

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So when someone makes a sacrifice  
 and then, in accordance with tradition,  
 puts the guts into god's hands, the birds  
 can seize those entrails well before Zeus can. 690  
 Back then no man would swear upon the gods—  
 they swore their oaths on birds. And even now, [520]  
 our Lampon seals his promises "By Goose,"  
 when he intends to cheat.<sup>1</sup> In days gone by,  
 all men considered you like that—as great  
 and sacred beings. Now they all think of you  
 as slaves and fools and useless layabouts.  
 They throw stones at you, as if you're mad.  
 And every hunter in the temples there  
 sets up his traps—all those nooses, gins, 690  
 limed sticks and snares, fine mesh and hunting nets,  
 and cages, too. Then once they've got you trapped,  
 they sell you by the bunch. Those who come to buy  
 poke and prod your flesh. If you seem good to eat, [530]  
 they don't simply roast you by yourself—no!  
 They grate on cheese, mix oil and silphium  
 with vinegar—and then whip up a sauce,  
 oily and sweet, which they pour on you hot,  
 as if you were a chunk of carrion meat.

## CHORUS

This human speaks 700  
 of our great pain  
 our fathers' sins [540]  
 we mourn again—  
 born into rule,  
 they threw away  
 what they received,  
 their fathers' sway.  
 But now you've come—  
 fine stroke of fate—  
 to save our cause. 710

<sup>2</sup> *Lampon*: a well known soothsayer in Athens. "By Goose" is a way of pretending to swear "By Zeus."

Here let me state  
I'll trust myself  
and all my chicks  
to help promote  
your politics.

#### CHORUS LEADER

You need to stick around to tell us all  
what we should do. Our lives won't be worthwhile  
unless by using every scheme there is  
we get back what's ours—our sovereignty.

#### PISTHETAIROS

Then the first point I'd advise you of is this: 720 [550]  
there should be one single city of the birds.  
Next, you should encircle the entire air,  
all this space between the earth and heaven,  
with a huge wall of baked brick—like Babylon.

#### EUELPIDES

Oh Kebriones and Porphyryon!  
What a mighty place! How well fortified! <sup>1</sup>

#### PISTHETAIROS

When you've completed that, demand from Zeus  
he give you back your rule. If he says no,  
he doesn't want to and won't sign on at once,  
you then declare a holy war on him. 730  
Tell those gods they can't come through your space  
with cocks erect, the way they used to do,  
rushing down to screw another woman—  
like Alkmene, Semele, or Alope.<sup>2</sup>  
For if you ever catch them coming down  
you'll stamp your seal right on their swollen pricks— [560]  
they won't be fucking women any more.

<sup>1</sup>*Kebriones* and *Porphyryon* were two Giants who fought against the Olympian gods.

<sup>1</sup>These women all had sexual encounters with gods. Alkmene and Zeus produced Hercules; Semele and Zeus produced Dionysus; and Alope and Poseidon produced Hippothoon.

And I'd advise you send another bird  
as herald down to human beings to say  
that since the birds from now on will be kings, 740  
they have to offer sacrifice to them.  
The offerings to the gods take second place.  
Then each of the gods must be closely matched  
with an appropriate bird. So if a man  
is offering Athena holy sacrifice,  
he must first give the Coot some barley corn.  
If sacrificing sheep to god Poseidon,  
let him bring toasted wheat grains to the Duck.  
And anyone who's going to sacrifice  
to Hercules must give the Cormorant 750  
some honey cakes. A ram for Zeus the king?  
Then first, because the Wren is king of birds,  
ahead of Zeus himself, his sacrifice  
requires the worshipper to execute  
an uncastrated gnat.

EUELPIDES

I like that bit about  
the slaughtered gnat. Now thunder on, great Zan.<sup>1</sup> [570]

CHORUS LEADER

But how will humans think of us as gods  
and not just jackdaws flying around on wings?

PISTHETAIROS

A foolish question. Hermes is a god,  
and he has wings and flies—so do others, 760  
all sorts of them. There's Victory, for one,  
with wings of gold. And Eros is the same.  
Then there's Iris—just like a timorous dove,  
that's what Homer says.

EUELPIDES

But what if Zeus  
lets his thunder peal, then fires down on us

<sup>2</sup> *Zan*: an archaic and contemptuous name for Zeus.

his lightning bolt—that's got wings as well.

PISTHETAIROS [*ignoring Euelpides*]

Now, if humans in their stupidity  
think nothing of you and keep worshipping  
Olympian gods, then a large cloud of birds,  
of rooks and sparrows, must attack their farms,  
devouring all the seed. And as they starve,  
let Demeter dole out grain to them.

770

[580]

EUELPIDES

She won't be willing to do that, by Zeus.  
She'll make excuses—as you'll see.

PISTHETAIROS

Then as a test,  
the ravens can peck out their livestock's eyes,  
the ones that pull the ploughs to work the land,  
and other creatures, too. Let Apollo  
make them better—he's the god of healing.  
That's why he gets paid.

EUELPIDES

But you can't do this  
till I've sold my two little oxen first.

780

PISTHETAIROS

But if they think of you as god, as life,  
as Earth, as Cronos and Poseidon, too,  
then all good things will come to them.

CHORUS LEADER

Tell me  
what these good things are.

PISTHETAIROS

Well, for starters,  
locusts won't eat the blossoms on their vines.  
The owls and kestrels in just one platoon  
will rid them of those pests. Mites and gall wasps  
won't devour the figs. One troop of thrushes

[590]

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will eradicate them one and all.

CHORUS LEADER

But how will we make people wealthy?  
That's what they mostly want.

790

PISTHETAIROS

When people come  
petitioning your shrines, the birds can show  
the mining sites that pay. They'll tell the priest  
the profitable routes for trade. That way  
no captain of a ship will be wiped out.

CHORUS LEADER

Why won't those captains come to grief?

PISTHETAIROS

They'll always ask the birds about the trip.  
Their seer will say, "A storm is on the way.  
Don't sail just yet" or "Now's the time to sail—  
you'll turn a tidy profit."

EUELPIDES

Hey, that's for me—  
I'll buy a merchant ship and take command.  
I won't be staying with you.

800

PISTHETAIROS

Birds can show men  
the silver treasures of their ancestors,  
buried in the ground so long ago.  
For birds know where these are. Men always say,  
"No one knows where my treasure lies, no one,  
except perhaps some bird."

[600]

EUELPIDES

I'll sell my boat.  
I'll buy a spade and dig up tons of gold.

CHORUS LEADER

How will we provide for human health?  
Such things dwell with the gods.

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PISTHETAIROS

If they're doing well,  
is that not giving them good health?

810

EUELPIDES

You're right.  
A man whose business isn't very sound  
is never medically well.

CHORUS LEADER

All right,  
but how will they get old? That's something, too,  
Olympian gods bestow. Must they die young?

PISTHETAIROS

No, no, by god. The birds will add on years,  
three hundred more.

CHORUS LEADER

And where will those come from?

PISTHETAIROS

From the birds' supply. You know the saying,  
"Five human lifetimes lives the cawing crow."<sup>1</sup>

EUELPIDES

My word, these birds are much more qualified  
to govern us than Zeus.

820 [610]

PISTHETAIROS

Far better qualified!  
First, we don't have to build them holy shrines  
made out of stone or put up golden doors  
to decorate their sanctuaries. They live  
beneath the bushes and young growing trees.  
As for the prouder birds, an olive grove  
will be their temple. When we sacrifice,  
no need to go to Ammon or to Delphi—  
we'll just stand among arbutus trees  
or oleasters with an offering—

830 [620]

<sup>1</sup> *crow*: In legend and folk lore the life span of the crow was enormous.

barley grains or wheat—uttering our prayers,  
our arms outstretched, so from them we receive  
our share of benefits. And these we'll gain  
by throwing them a few handfuls of grain.

CHORUS LEADER

Old man, how much you've been transformed for me—  
from my worst enemy into my friend,  
my dearest friend. These strategies of yours—  
I'll not abandon them, not willingly.

CHORUS

The words you've said make us rejoice—  
and so we'll swear with just one voice 840  
an oath that if you stand with me— [630]  
our thoughts and aims in unity—  
honest, pious, just, sincere,  
to go against the gods up there,  
if we're both singing the same song  
the gods won't have my sceptre long.

CHORUS LEADER

Whatever can be done with force alone  
we're ready to take on—what requires brains  
or thinking through, all that stuff's up to you.

PISTHETAIROS

That's right, by Zeus. No time for dozing now, 850 [640]  
or entertaining doubts, like Nikias.<sup>1</sup>  
No—let's get up and at it fast.

TEREUS

But first, you must come in this nest of mine,  
these sticks and twigs assembled here. So now,  
both of you, tell us your names.

PISTHETAIROS

That's easy.

<sup>1</sup>*Nikias*: a well-known Athenian general, famous for his hesitation about tactics.

My name's Pisthetairos.

TEREUS

And this man here?

EUELPIDES

I'm Euelpides, from Crioia.

TEREUS

Welcome both of you!

PISTHETAIROS and EUELPIDES

Thanks very much.

TEREUS

Won't you come in?

PISTHETAIROS

Let's go. But you go first—  
show us the way.

TEREUS

Come on, then.

*[Tereus enters his house]*

PISTHETAIROS *[holding back, calling into the house]*

But . . . it's strange . . .

860

Come back a minute.

*[Tereus reappears at the door]*

Look, tell us both  
how me and him can share the place with you  
when you can fly but we're not able to.

[650]

TEREUS

I don't see any problem there.

PISTHETAIROS

Maybe,  
but in Aesop's fables there's a story told  
about some fox who hung around an eagle,  
with unfortunate results.

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# Aristophanes

# Birds

## Translated by Ian Johnston

The *Birds* has long been hailed as one of the finest masterpieces written by Aristophanes (ca. 456 BC – ca. 386 BC), the greatest of all classical Athenian comic dramatists. First performed in 414 BC, at the height of the Peloponnesian War, which pitted Athens against Sparta, the play celebrates the extraordinary character of Athens in a manner that is at once robust, lyrical, satiric, and full of ironic resonance.

In the play, two Athenians, Pisthetairos and Euclpides, seek to escape the aggressively quarrelsome climate of Athens by hiking up into the mountains to seek advice from the birds about where they might find a more peaceful place to live, a city where they can relax and enjoy life. But once they begin interacting with the birds, the Athenians cannot resist persuading the creatures to organize themselves into a city state, so that they can exert pressure on the gods above and men below in order to gain power over them (for example, by controlling the gods' access to human beings). The impromptu scheme escalates, and by the end of the play, Pisthetairos has supplanted the gods and now rules everything, an occasion which they all celebrate by eating a meal of cooked birds.

Much of the play is taken up with the bawdy, energetic, and inventive comedy familiar to readers of Aristophanes. But underlying the humour is an ironic exploration of the Athenian character, which is far too restless and acquisitive, far too in love with ambitious scheming and, above all, with language itself, so that it cannot resist taking control of each and every situation.

Ian Johnston's new translation, which stays close to Aristophanes' text, captures the dramatic energy and the frequently shifting tone of the original play. The English text is immediately accessible and will be of particular interest to those interested in dramatic production. The translation also includes footnotes to assist readers with some of the more puzzling contemporary references.

### About the Translator



Ian Johnston was born in Valparaiso, Chile, and educated in Canada and England. He has a BSc from McGill in Geology and Chemistry, a BA from Bristol in English and Greek, and an MA from Toronto in English. For many years he taught as a college and university-college instructor in British Columbia teaching English, Classics and Liberal Studies. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. His translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have recently been published in both book and audiobook form. He is now retired and living in Nanaimo, British Columbia.

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