

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Birds 414 B.C.E.

Aristophanes

Story

The Birds occupies a unique moment in Athenian political history. Athens is enjoying a period of relative quiet, after the deaths of Cleon (Athens) and Brasidas (Spartan), and is just at the time of this play launching a huge naval expedition, the Sicilian Expedition, aimed at consolidating her claims to ownership of the Mediterranean. In other words, Aristophanes' customary gripes, about the foolishness of Athenian society, its poverty, cultural sophistry, pompousness, and above all corrupt leaders like Cleon, do not at this moment dominate the curiosities of the theater going public in Athens. It seems, one guesses looking back, as though this must have been a moment of relative (and stupendously) creative action in Athens. Great achievements of sculpture, architecture, drama, and history are evident on all sides, and in thought the movement of the Sophists is flourishing on waves of lively and subtle public discourse. In this moment of creative calm, it has to have seemed rejuvenating to delight in a light and airy comedy, in which one's only grievances have to do with the noises the birds make in the forest. And yet, all this context adds up to a unique moment only when we realize that at the time this play was published Athens was launched on a huge naval expedition, The Sicilian Expedition (415-413 B.C.E.), which was destined to destroy the Athenian navy and a majority of its available fighting forces, and which was just around the corner from first night in the Theater of Dionysus.

The story of the play itself is simple, though it is embroidered with considerable local detail. Two midlife Athenians are sick of daily life in Athens, where guys spend all their time in the law courts—shades of *The Wasps*. The men are looking for Tereus, a king who was formerly metamorphosed into a Hoopoe bird. The guys have the notion that this god-generated bird can help them find a finer place to live. The remainder of the play is devoted to the peripeties of the two Athenians, Euelpides (Mr. Hopeful) and Pisthetairus (Mr. Trusting), as they pursue their search for a perfect haven, for what in fact turns out to be a sky kingdom and a source of ultimate bliss.

En route to this conclusion, the men interact with the birds—who are themselves a fantasia of colorful beaked figures, whose lines, and choral movements mime the exotics of the forest itself, and bring to center stage all the lyric and choreographical eloquence of a Broadway musical. From the ends of the world the birds of different habitats assemble, at first alarmed by the presence of men, then persuaded by the Hoopoe to settle with their guests, and in the end, after considerable negotiations, prepared to share with the intruders a magic root, which turns the guys into a (rather scruffy) semblance of birds.

Teamed up, the bird chorus and the two existential adventurers move into, and take charge of, their new Cloud-Cuckoo-Land domain, the construction of which is whipped into quick action. An official poet, a famed geometer—ready to sketch out plots in the air— a law peddler ready to do business with the new community: such messengers sneak through the perimeter of the new construction, with the news that multitudes are flocking in the direction of Cloud-Cuckoo-Land. Prometheus shows up next, hidden under a large umbrella, so that he cannot be seen from above, to report that the gods in Olympus are being cut off from their regular supply of sacrificial incense, by the barrier of the new kingdom. Zeus longs to negotiate but should not be placated, claims Prometheus, unless he turns over both his scepter and his girlfriend, Sovereignty. Finally Zeus does so, leaving Pisthetairus to marry the lady, and claim his place as the legal ruler of Cloud-Cuckoo-Land.

Themes

Spectacle. Splendidly and fancifully ornamented birds, the music of what to the Greeks were exotic calls, subtle dance steps and choral moves, prolonged use of parabasis and choral back and forth:

Aristophanes is never closer, than in this play, to creating a philosophical musical review. Should we think *Hamilton*?

Idealism. In *The Clouds* we experience Aristophanes' view that sophistic thought, which 'makes the worse appear the better' in reasoning, is corrupting his society. The playwright continues to work this issue, of the relation between good thought and a good society, in later plays like *The Birds*. Serious modern thinkers, like Arnold Toynbee, in his *A Study of History* (1934-1961), have suggested the relation between early Christian thought and that of Aristophanes in this play: Cloud-Cuckoo-Land is a kind of heaven, in which new kinds of concord, e.g. mortal plus natural, form to replace the influence of the old dispensation, that of the Olympians (or the World of the Old Testament).

Rebellion. From *The Acharnians* on, with its explicit contempt for the government of Athens, right through *The Wasps* and *The Clouds*, Aristophanes has been consistently rebellious, funny but not funny, in his insistence that the world he is living in is corrupt and dysfunctional. The present play underscores the adage that comedy exceeds tragedy, in its insistence on the mis-arrangement of the world and human affairs in it. The social world we know is sufficiently defective that we must start out on expeditions of new founding. Light hearted this expedition seems to be, as Pisthetairus and Euelpides start off, in Don Quixote mood, in search of a finer place to settle. Frivolous may seem to be the guys' interactions with the receptive bird community, but by the end we have seen a new social kingdom created.

Characters

Euelpides an Athenian ('Mr. Hopeful')
 Pisthetairus an Athenian ('Mr. Trusting')
 Servant of Tereus, now a hoopoe
 Tereus, once King of Thrace, now king of the birds
 Priest
 Poet
 Oraclemonger
 Meton. Geometer and astronomer
 Inspector, from Athens
 Newsagent
 First and second messenger
 Iris. A swift small-time goddess.
 First Herald
 Father Beater
 Cinesias. Dithyrambic poet
 Informer
 Prometheus. The Titan who stole fire from Olympus, and gave it to mankind
 Poseidon god of the sea
 Heracles deified man
 Triballus barbarian god
 Second herald
 Chorus twenty four species of birds

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Pisthetairus Pisthetairus and Euelpides are joint explorers in the adventure which leads to the founding of Cloud-Cuckoo-Land. In the end, though, Pisthetairus takes the girl, and makes the majority of plot-developing moves. Perhaps more to the point: the two men work together remarkably well, adapting to one another's moods, teasing one another playfully, and sharing one inventive step after another as they dance ahead. Pisthetairus, a deified human being, is in that sense, and that sense alone, a parallel to Jesus. Pisthetairus is the main character, by a hair.

Ebullient. Starting off with a crow attached to his wrist, as a trip guide, Pisthetairus is high spirited and ready for anything.

Astonished. Pisthetairus is amazed by the regal plumage of the king of the Birds, Tereus. He sees the drama of his situation.

Inventive. Pisthetairus proposes to the birds a new social arrangement which will enable them to reclaim their historical primacy over the Olympians.

Propagandist. Pisthetairus appreciates the advantage for mortals, if they no longer need to make sacrifices to the Olympian gods and construct expensive temples to them.

Victorious. In the end Peisistratus weds Zeus' girlfriend Sovereignty. He seems to get the best of all worlds.

Parallels

Arnold Toynbee, in his *A Study of History*, notes parallels between Pisthetairus (a deified human being) and Jesus Christ, and between heaven and Cloud-Cuckoo-Land. In the latter comparison he draws attention to the example of *Matthew 6:26*, where the birds of the sky prove noteworthy for making their living without reaping or gathering, an echo of a conversation between Euelpides and Hoopoe. One might add that the mood of the two Athenians, as they set out in search of a finer place to live, reflects the kind of innocent and naïve quest-mood with which Pilgrim prances out into his destiny in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Discussion questions

Do you think that the present play is a code argument against Athenian militarism, Alcibiades, or the legal preoccupations of the Athenians.? Or is *The Birds* simply good fun?

What use does Aristophanes make here, of the *agon* and *parabasis*, the chorus itself, and the frequent *stichomythia* between the two main characters? In other words, what kind of window dressing does the playwright build into this drama?

How does Aristophanes feel about the view point of the birds themselves? Does he see the human intrusion, into the kingdom of the birds, as advantageous to these plumed creatures?

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