

The Birds

by

Aristophanes

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The Birds

INTRODUCTION

'The Birds' differs markedly from all the other Comedies of Aristophanes which have come down to us in subject and general conception. It is just an extravaganza pure and simple--a graceful, whimsical theme chosen expressly for the sake of the opportunities it afforded of bright, amusing dialogue, pleasing lyrical interludes, and charming displays of brilliant stage effects and pretty dresses. Unlike other plays of the same Author, there is here apparently no serious political MOTIF underlying the surface burlesque and buffoonery.

Some critics, it is true, profess to find in it a reference to the unfortunate Sicilian Expedition, then in progress, and a prophecy of its failure and the political downfall of Alcibiades. But as a matter of fact, the whole thing seems rather an attempt on the dramatist's part to relieve the overwrought minds of his fellow-citizens, anxious and discouraged at the unsatisfactory reports from before Syracuse, by a work conceived in a lighter vein than usual and mainly unconnected with contemporary realities. The play was produced in the year 414 B.C., just when success or failure in Sicily hung in the balance, though already the outlook was gloomy, and many circumstances pointed to impending disaster. Moreover, the public conscience was still shocked and perturbed over the mysterious affair of the mutilation of the Hermae, which had occurred immediately before the sailing of the fleet, and strongly suspicious of Alcibiades' participation in the outrage. In spite of the inherent charm of the subject, the splendid outbursts of lyrical poetry in some of the choruses and the beauty of the scenery and costumes, 'The Birds' failed to win the first prize. This was acclaimed to a play of Aristophanes' rival, Amipsias, the title of which, 'The Comastoe,' or 'Revellers,' "seems to imply that the chief interest was derived from direct allusions to the outrage above mentioned and to the individuals suspected to have been engaged in it."

For this reason, which militated against its immediate success, viz. the absence of direct allusion to contemporary politics-- there are, of course, incidental references here and there to topics and personages of the day--the play appeals perhaps more than any other of our Author's productions to the modern reader. Sparkling wit, whimsical fancy, poetic charm, are of all ages, and can be appreciated as readily by ourselves as by an Athenian audience of two thousand years ago, though, of course, much is inevitably lost "without the important adjuncts of music, scenery, dresses and what we may call 'spectacle' generally, which we know in this instance to have been on the most magnificent scale."

The plot is this. Euelpides and Pisthetaerus, two old Athenians, disgusted with the litigiousness, wrangling and sycophancy of their countrymen, resolve upon quitting Attica. Having heard of the fame of Epos (the hoopoe), sometime called Tereus, and now King of the Birds, they determine, under the direction of a raven and a jackdaw, to seek from him and his subject birds a city free from all care and strife." Arrived at the Palace of Epos, they knock, and Trochilus (the wren), in a state of great flutter, as he mistakes them for fowlers, opens the door and informs them that his Majesty is asleep. When he awakes, the strangers appear before him, and after listening to a long and eloquent harangue on the superior attractions of a residence among the birds, they propose a notable scheme of their own to further enhance its advantages and definitely secure the sovereignty of the universe now exercised by the gods of Olympus.

The birds are summoned to meet in general council. They come flying up from all quarters of the heavens, and after a brief misunderstanding, during which they come near tearing the two human envoys to pieces, they listen to the exposition of the latter's plan. This is nothing less than the building of a new city, to be called Nephelococcygia, or 'Cloud-cuckoo-town,' between earth and heaven, to be garrisoned and guarded by the birds in such a way as to intercept all communication of the gods with their worshippers on earth. All steam of sacrifice will be prevented from rising to Olympus, and the Immortals will very soon be starved into an acceptance of any terms proposed. The new Utopia is duly constructed, and the daring plan to secure the sovereignty is in a fair way to succeed. Meantime various quacks and charlatans, each with a special scheme for improving things, arrive from earth, and are one after the other exposed and dismissed. Presently arrives Prometheus, who informs Epos of the desperate straits to which the gods are by this time reduced, and advises him to push his claims and demand the hand of Basileia (Dominion), the handmaid of Zeus. Next an embassy from the Olympians appears on the scene, consisting of Heracles, Posidon and a god from the savage regions of the Triballians. After some disputation, it is agreed that all reasonable demands of the birds are to be granted, while Pisthetaerus is to have Basileia as his bride. The comedy winds up with the epithalamium in honour of the nuptials.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

EUELPIDES PISTHETAERUS EPOPS (the Hoopoe) TROCHILUS, Servant to Epos
PHOENICOPTERUS HERALDS A PRIEST A POET A PROPHET METON, a
Geometrician A COMMISSIONER A DEALER IN DECREES IRIS A PARRICIDE
CINESIAS, a Dithyrambic Bard AN INFORMER PROMETHEUS POSIDON
TRIBALLUS HERACLES SLAVES OF PISTHETAERUS MESSENGERS CHORUS
OF BIRDS

SCENE: A wild, desolate tract of open country; broken rocks and brushwood occupy the centre of the stage.

EUELPIDES (TO HIS JAY)[1]

Do you think I should walk straight for yon tree?

f[1] Euelpides is holding a jay and Pisthetaerus a crow; they are the guides who are to lead them to the kingdom of the birds.

PISTHETAERUS (TO HIS CROW)

Cursed beast, what are you croaking to me?...to retrace my steps?

EUELPIDES

Why, you wretch, we are wandering at random, we are exerting ourselves only to return to the same spot; 'tis labour lost.

PISTHETAERUS

To think that I should trust to this crow, which has made me cover more than a thousand furlongs!

EUELPIDES

And that I to this jay, which has torn every nail from my fingers!

PISTHETAERUS

If only I knew where we were....

EUELPIDES

Could you find your country again from here?

PISTHETAERUS

No, I feel quite sure I could not, any more than could Execestides[1] find his.

f[1] A stranger who wanted to pass as an Athenian, although coming originally for a far-away barbarian country.

EUELPIDES

Oh dear! oh dear!

PISTHETAERUS

Aye, aye, my friend, 'tis indeed the road of "oh dears" we are following.

EUELPIDES

That Philocrates, the bird-seller, played us a scurvy trick, when he pretended these two guides could help us to find Tereus,[1] the Epops, who is a bird, without being born of one. He has indeed sold us this jay, a true son of Tharelides,[2] for an obolus, and this crow for three, but what can they do? Why, nothing whatever but bite and scratch! -- What's the matter with you then, that you keep opening your beak? Do you want us to fling ourselves headlong down these rocks? There is no road that way.

f[1] A king of Thrace, a son of Ares, who married Procne, the daughter of Pandion, King of Athens, whom he had assisted against the Megarians. He violated his sister-in-law, Philomela, and then cut out her tongue; she nevertheless managed to convey to her sister how she had been treated. They both agreed to kill Itys, whom Procne had borne to Tereus, and dished up the limbs of his own son to the father; at the end of the meal Philomela appeared and threw the child's head upon the table. Tereus rushed with drawn sword upon the princesses, but all the actors in this terrible scene were metamorph[osed]. Tereus became an Epops (hoopoe), Procne a swallow, Philomela a nightingale, and Itys a goldfinch. According to Anacreon and Apollodorus it was Procne who became the nightingale and Philomela the swallow, and this is the version of the tradition followed by Aristophanes.

f[2] An Athenian who had some resemblance to a jay--so says the scholiast, at any rate.

PISTHETAERUS

Not even the vestige of a track in any direction.

EUELPIDES

And what does the crow say about the road to follow?

PISTHETAERUS

By Zeus, it no longer croaks the same thing it did.

EUELPIDES

And which way does it tell us to go now?

PISTHETAERUS

It says that, by dint of gnawing, it will devour my fingers.

EUELPIDES

What misfortune is ours! we strain every nerve to get to the birds,[1] do everything we can to that end, and we cannot find our way! Yes, spectators, our madness is quite different from that of Sacas. He is not a citizen, and would fain be one at any cost; we, on the contrary, born of an honourable tribe and family and living in the midst of our fellow-citizens, we have fled from our country as hard as ever we could go. 'Tis not that we hate it; we recognize it to be great and rich, likewise that everyone has the right to ruin himself; but the crickets only chirrup among the fig-trees for a month or two, whereas the Athenians spend their whole lives in chanting forth judgments from their law-courts.[2] That is why we started off with a basket, a stew-pot and some myrtle boughs[3] and have come to seek a quiet country in which to settle. We are going to Tereus, the Epops, to learn from him, whether, in his aerial flights, he has noticed some town of this kind.

f[1] Literally, 'to go to the crows,' a proverbial expression equivalent to our 'going to the devil.'

f[2] They leave Athens because of their hatred of lawsuits and informers; this is the especial failing of the Athenians satirized in 'The Wasps.'

f[3] Myrtle boughs were used in sacrifices, and the founding of every colony was started by a sacrifice.

PISTHETAERUS

Here! look!

EUELPIDES

What's the matter?

PISTHETAERUS

Why, the crow has been pointing me to something up there for some time now.

EUELPIDES

And the jay is also opening its beak and craning its neck to show me I know not what. Clearly, there are some birds about here. We shall soon know, if we kick up a noise to start them.

PISTHETAERUS

Do you know what to do? Knock your leg against this rock.

EUELPIDES

And you your head to double the noise.

PISTHETAERUS

Well then use a stone instead; take one and hammer with it.

EUELPIDES

Good idea! Ho there, within! Slave! slave!

PISTHETAERUS

What's that, friend! You say, "slave," to summon Epos! It would be much better to shout, "Epos, Epos!"

EUELPIDES

Well then, Epos! Must I knock again? Epos!

TROCHILUS

Who's there? Who calls my master?

PISTHETAERUS

Apollo the Deliverer! what an enormous beak![1]

f[1] The actors wore masks made to resemble the birds they were supposed to represent.

TROCHILUS

Good god! they are bird-catchers.

EUELPIDES

The mere sight of him petrifies me with terror. What a horrible monster.

TROCHILUS

Woe to you!

EUELPIDES

But we are not men.

TROCHILUS

What are you, then?

EUELPIDES

I am the Fearling, an African bird.

TROCHILUS

You talk nonsense.

EUELPIDES

Well, then, just ask it of my feet.[1]

f[1] Fear had had disastrous effects upon Euelpides' internal economy, and this his feet evidenced.

TROCHILUS

And this other one, what bird is it?

PISTHETAERUS

I? I am a Cackling,[1] from the land of the pheasants.

f[1] The same mishap had occurred to Pisthetaerus.

EUELPIDES

But you yourself, in the name of the gods! what animal are you?

TROCHILUS

Why, I am a slave-bird.

EUELPIDES

Why, have you been conquered by a cock?

TROCHILUS

No, but when my master was turned into a peewit, he begged me to become a bird too, to follow and to serve him.

EUELPIDES

Does a bird need a servant, then?

TROCHILUS

'Tis no doubt because he was a man. At times he wants to eat a dish of loach from Phalerum; I seize my dish and fly to fetch him some. Again he wants some pea-soup; I seize a ladle and a pot and run to get it.

EUELPIDES

This is, then, truly a running-bird.[1] Come, Trochilus, do us the kindness to call your master.

f[1] The Greek word for a wren is derived from the same root as 'to run.'

TROCHILUS

Why, he has just fallen asleep after a feed of myrtle-berries and a few grubs.

EUELPIDES

Never mind; wake him up.

TROCHILUS

I am certain he will be angry. However, I will wake him to please you.

PISTHETAERUS

You cursed brute! why, I am almost dead with terror!

EUELPIDES

Oh! my god! 'twas sheer fear that made me lose my jay.

PISTHETAERUS

Ah! you great coward! were you so frightened that you let go your jay?

EUELPIDES

And did you not lose your crow, when you fell sprawling on the ground? Pray tell me that.

PISTHETAERUS

No, no.

EUELPIDES

Where is it, then?

PISTHETAERUS

It has flown away.

EUELPIDES

Then you did not let it go? Oh! you brave fellow!

EPOPS

Open the forest,[1] that I may go out!

f[1] No doubt there was some scenery to represent a forest. Besides, there is a pun intended. The words answering for 'forests' and 'door' in Greek only differ slightly in sound.

EUELPIDES

By Heracles! what a creature! what plumage! What means this triple crest?

EPOPS

Who wants me?

EUELPIDES

The twelve great gods have used you ill, meseems.

EPOPS

Are you chaffing me about my feathers? I have been a man, strangers.

EUELPIDES

'Tis not you we are jeering at.

EPOPS

At what, then?

EUELPIDES

Why, 'tis your beak that looks so odd to us.

EPOPS

This is how Sophocles outrages me in his tragedies. Know, I once was Tereus.[1]

f[1] Sophocles had written a tragedy about Tereus, in which, no doubt, the king finally appears as a hoopoe.

EUELPIDES

You were Tereus, and what are you now? a bird or a peacock?[1]

f[1] [O]ne would expect the question to be "bird or man." --Are you a peacock? The hoopoe resembles the peacock inasmuch as both have crests.

EPOPS

I am a bird.

EUELPIDES

Then where are your feathers? For I don't see them.

EPOPS

They have fallen off.

EUELPIDES

Through illness?

EPOPS

No. All birds moult their feathers, you know, every winter, and others grow in their place. But tell me, who are you?

EUELPIDES

We? We are mortals.

EPOPS

From what country?

EUELPIDES

From the land of the beautiful galleys.[1]

f[1] Athens.

EPOPS

Are you dicasts?[1]

f[1] The Athenians were madly addicted to lawsuits. (See 'The Wasps.')

EUELPIDES

No, if anything, we are anti-dicasts.

EPOPS

Is that kind of seed sown among you?[1]

f[1] As much as to say, 'Then you have such things as anti-dicasts?' And Euelpides practically replaces, 'Very few.'

EUELPIDES

You have to look hard to find even a little in our fields.

EPOPS

What brings you here?

EUELPIDES

We wish to pay you a visit.

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