9

Birds

TWO FUGITIVES

Two men are wandering along in some remote spot. Most of Aristophanes' plays are set in Athens (or at least begin there), but *Birds* is in a far-off rocky place, and the travellers seem to be lost.

EUELPIDES. I don't know where on earth we've got to now.
PEISETAIROS. Could you find where your country is from here?
EUELPIDES. From here, no; nor could Exekestides!

(*Birds* 9–11)

Exekestides was apparently a man who had recently shown great ingenuity in getting himself recognized as an Athenian citizen; so these lines use a topical joke to make clear to the audience that the two speakers are Athenians who are a very long way from Athens.[1] Then a similar joke about another would-be citizen, named Akestor and nicknamed Sakas, leads into an explanation of why they have left home, given straight to the theatre audience.

You see, you men who've come to listen here,
We have the opposite disease to Sakas:
He's not a citizen, but pushes in,
While we're of honourable descent and clan
Among our fellow-citizens, we've not
Been shooed away, but flown out on both—feet.
It's not that we don't like our native city;
We don't deny it's great and prosperous,
Open to everyone—for paying fines.
Cicadas sing just for a month or two
Upon the branches, but Athenians
Sing on their lawcourt trials all their lives!

[1] On Exekestides and Akestor see MacDowell in *Tr.Com.Pol.* 364–7.

And that's the thing that's made us walk this walk,
Carrying basket, pot, and myrtle wreaths:[2]
We're wandering round to find a carefree place
Where we can settle down and spend our time.

(*Birds* 30–45)

So they are hoping to find a place where they will live more happily than in Athens. They want somewhere that is 'carefree'; the Greek word here implies particularly freedom from political and legal business,[3] and the references to trials and paying fines make clear that the long arm of the law is what they want to evade. Much the same is implied a little later, when they explain themselves to Tereus.

TEREUS. Where were you born?
PEISETAIROS. Where the fine triremes come from!
TEREUS. Not jurors?
PEISETAIROS. Oh no, just the other way;
We're anti-jurors.
TEREUS. Is that seed sown there?
PEISETAIROS. You'll find a little in the countryside.
TEREUS. And what's the business that you've come here for?
PEISETAIROS. We wanted to consult you.
TEREUS. What about?
PEISETAIROS. Because you were a human once, like us,
And you owed people money once, like us,
And you preferred not paying once, like us.

(*Birds* 108–16)

Tereus knows at once that the city with the best triremes in its navy is Athens, but he also knows that in Athens there are a lot of jurors. (The audience is expected to laugh at the incongruous connection of ideas.) The two men, however, so far from being jurors themselves, want to avoid juries. Rather than Athenian townsmen, they are normal human beings: they get into debt, and like to avoid paying what they owe. (Again the audience laughs at the

[2] The basket, pot, and myrtles are probably for an inaugural religious ceremony, or possibly just for a symposium. Cf. R. Hamilton *GRBS* 26 (1985) 235–9, Bowie *Aristophanes* 152.

[3] ἀπράγμων: for full discussion of this term see L. B. Carter *The Quiet Athenian* (Oxford 1986).

sequence of thought.) It has been maintained that they 'are utterly sick of Athens, sick of the high prices, the burden of debt, the everlasting informers, the ferocious law-courts, and the whole cloud of anxiety'.[4] But that is too broad a description. Their concern is more specific. They are afraid of being prosecuted for debt or for minor offences, and they want to avoid paying up. Their motive is much the same as the motive of Strepsiades in *Clouds*. But it is differently treated. Whereas Strepsiades explains at some length how he got into debt, in *Birds* we hear no details of the two men's problems. This helps the individual spectator to identify himself with them; no one in the audience would think Strepsiades was just like himself, but many could assume that the more vaguely indicated problems of the two men in *Birds* were like their own, and so would sympathize with them and share their desire for a carefree place to live.

The two men give their names in 644–5. Both names are evidently invented by Aristophanes. One is Euelpides, an optimistic name: 'Hopefulson'. The other is given in the manuscripts as Peisthetairos, but scholars have objected that Peisth- is an ungrammatical form. Possibly it should be corrected to Pisthetairos, 'Trusty comrade'; more probably it should be Peithetairos or Peisetairos, 'Persuading comrades', and since Peis- is more usual than Peith- in Athenian names (such as Peisistratos and Peisandros) I follow most recent scholars in adopting that form here.

At first the two men are not clearly differentiated, and there are difficulties about the assignment of speeches to one or the other. (It is generally agreed that Aristophanes himself seldom or never wrote the name of the speaker at the beginning of each speech; attributions that we find in the medieval manuscripts are conjectured by later scribes and commentators, and we may be able to correct them by reference to the text itself.[5]) It is Peisetairos, not Euelpides, who becomes the leader of the new city and remains on-stage in the second half of the play; and from this fact (and from the form of his name, if we have got it right) it may be inferred that he takes the lead in the first half too, so that new ideas and proposals should be attributed to him, whereas comic or vulgar comments may be assigned to Euelpides. Marzullo has assigned the lines on this basis;[6]

[4] Murray *Aristophanes* 143.

[5] Cf. J. C. B. Lowe *BICS* 9 (1962) 27–42, Russo *Aristophanes* 37–43.

[6] B. Marzullo *Philologus* 114 (1970) 181–94.

subsequent editors have accepted his assignments with only minor variations, and they are likely to be generally correct, although doubt remains about many individual lines.

TEREUS

The two fugitives from Athens are not wandering at random in their search for a new home. They are looking for Tereus the hoopoe, who should be able to advise them, and are supposedly being guided by two other birds, a jackdaw and a crow, to the place where he lives. (In the original performance these two birds, unlike the others in the play, may have been real birds, allowed to fly away at line 61.)

The story of Tereus must have been familiar to many in Aristophanes' audience. It is one of the more horrific Greek myths. King Pandion of Athens had two daughters, Prokne and Philomela, and gave Prokne in marriage to King Tereus of Thrace. Prokne was lonely without her sister, and so Tereus went to fetch Philomela to stay with her. On the journey north from Athens he became enamoured with Philomela and raped her; then, to prevent her revealing this to Prokne, he cut out her tongue, but she succeeded in conveying the facts to her sister by embroidering them on a cloth (in a picture or, anachronistically, in letters). To take revenge on Tereus, Prokne killed their son Itys, cooked his flesh, and served it to Tereus for dinner, but when Tereus discovered what he had eaten he gave chase to the two sisters, who fled. Zeus then transformed them all into birds: Prokne became the nightingale, Philomela the swallow,[7] and Tereus the hoopoe. The myth is an explanation of the cries of these birds: the nightingale mourns her son (Greek *Itu Itu*), the swallow exclaims at her oppressor (*Tereu*), and the hoopoe searches for them (*pou pou*, meaning 'Where? Where?').

This myth had been brought to the attention of the Athenian audience by two tragedies now lost, the first by Sophocles and the second by Philokles, both entitled *Tereus* and both presumably fairly

[7] The transposition of these two, making Philomela the nightingale and Prokne the swallow, is found only in later versions of the myth, including Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

recent, though their exact dates are not known.[8] So Aristophanes uses it in his play by making Tereus, now transformed into a hoopoe, the leader of the birds. The comic logic is that, having been a human being, Tereus knows what human beings want; being now a bird, he has flown around everywhere and seen all parts of the world. Thus he is uniquely qualified to identify the best place for men to live.

PEISETAIROS. And then you were transformed into a bird
And flew around all over land and sea;
You know what men know, and what birds know too.
That's why we've come to you, as suppliants,
To see if you can tell us of some city
Soft as a woollen fleece to lie down in.

(*Birds* 117–22)

This explanation is not given fully until after Tereus has already appeared. But there is a hint of it earlier (46–8), and before his appearance it is made clear that he combines human and avian features. First Peisetairos knocks at the rock, as if it were the door of a house in Athens. (This is the play's door-knocking scene; cf. p. 18.) A servant answers; he is a bird, but played by an actor, and therefore man-sized.

PEISETAIROS. My god, what kind of animal are you?
SERVANT. A slave bird.
PEISETAIROS. Were you beaten in a cock-fight?
SERVANT. No; when my master turned into a hoopoe,
He prayed that I should turn into a bird,
So as to have a servant to attend him.
PEISETAIROS. What, does a bird require a servant too?
SERVANT. *He* does, because he used to be a man.
Sometimes he longs to eat Phaleric sprats:
I take the bowl and buzz off for some sprats.
He wants pea-soup; tureen and spoon are needed:
I buzz off for a spoon.

[8] For recent discussion of Sophocles' *Tereus* see A. Kiso *The Lost Sophocles* (New York 1984) 57–84. For Philokles' *Tereus* see *Birds* 281–2 with scholia. Bowie *Aristophanes* 167 suggests a reference to cult, but in fact there is virtually no evidence for an Athenian cult involving Tereus, and *Birds* 100–1 and 281–2 show that Aristophanes expects the audience to think rather of the tragedies.

PEISETAIROS. This bird's a buzzard![9]
Here, buzzard—know what? Call your master for us.
SERVANT. But I assure you he's asleep just now,
After a meal of myrtle-berries and gnats.
PEISETAIROS. Still, wake him up!

(*Birds* 69–83)

The hoopoe has a mixed diet. He eats myrtle-berries and gnats, as other birds do. But he also eats sprats from Phaeron, like any urban Athenian, and soup, for which he needs a spoon; and he has a servant to run and fetch them for him. Thus he is still partly human. One wonders what he looked like in the original performance. There are some clues in 93–106: a triple crest is mentioned, and a funny-looking beak, but his feathers have moulted.

I, Tereus, am disfigured in this way
By Sophocles, when I'm in tragedies.

(*Birds* 100–1)

The basis of this joke must be that in Sophocles' play the costume of Tereus, when transformed into a hoopoe, was rather unconvincing, with a strange beak and no feathers; and now, some years later, Aristophanes reproduces the same costume.[10] There seems to be no resemblance in the characterization, however. Sophocles' Tereus must have been tyrannical. Aristophanes' Tereus, as the play proceeds, turns out to be genial and conciliatory. In fact, once the character has been introduced, Aristophanes makes no further use of the original myth, except in one respect: the piper who as usual accompanies the songs is regarded as being Tereus' wife Prokne, the nightingale, who still laments their son Itys (212). She too is evidently half-human, and there is some comic business when

[9] In translating I have changed the species of bird (τροχίλος, probably meaning a plover) in order to preserve the pun.

[10] There is no evidence that Tereus did not appear as a hoopoe at the end of Sophocles' play, and *Birds* 100–1 implies that he did. Probably Sophocles gave the actor only a special mask or head-dress to symbolize the transformation, not a bird-costume for his whole body; that would explain the Aristophanic complaint that there were no feathers.

Euelpides tries to kiss her (671–4);[11] but there is nothing to suggest any lack of conjugal affection between her and Tereus. Nor can any line of *Birds* be identified as a quotation or parody of a line of *Tereus*. Aristophanes does not use *Tereus* here, as he had used *Telephos* in *Akharnians*, to illuminate the theme of his own play, and he does not require his audience to remember anything of it but the transformation of Tereus and Prokne into a hoopoe and a nightingale.[12]

THE BIRDS

Tereus' suggestions about where they might live do not appeal to Peisetairos and Euelpides. But then Peisetairos has a brilliant idea, that the Birds should establish a new city in the sky, between heaven and earth, where they will be able to control communication between gods and men and so rule over both. The plan is fantastic and impossible; but in Aristophanic comedy impossible things are frequently done, and all the rest of the play is devoted to carrying out Peisetairos' scheme.

First, though, the Birds have to be persuaded to adopt it. Tereus and Prokne sing (that is, the actor playing Tereus sings with pipe accompaniment) to call them together. This song probably had unusual music. We have only the words, but even from them we can see how various bird-cries such as *tio tio tio* and *kikkabau kikkabau* are incorporated, and different metres are used to summon different classes of bird: marsh-birds, sea-birds, and so on.[13] Soon they begin to arrive: first four individuals, and then a whole lot in a rush. Twenty-four species are named (297–304), and since a comedy had twenty-four choristers we can guess that each chorister was dressed

[11] F. E. Romer *TAPA* 113 (1983) 135–42 convincingly argues that the nightingale's 'beak' is actually the double pipe, which gets in the way of a kiss. If that is correct, we should assume (*pace* Romer) that the piper himself appeared here as the nightingale in a comic female costume, and did not merely play an accompaniment from off-stage. Cf. O. Taplin *Comic Angels* (Oxford 1993) 106–7.

[12] Possible connections between *Tereus* and *Birds* have been much discussed, but those suggested are generally unconvincing. See especially Hofmann *Mythos* 72–8, Zannini Quirini *Nephelokokkygia* 39–44, G. Dobrov *AJP* 114 (1993) 189–234.

[13] For metrical analysis see Zimmermann *Untersuchungen* 1.74–82.

as a different bird, forming an exceptionally colourful and spectacular chorus.

At first the Birds are hostile to Peisetairos and Euelpides, and threaten to attack them. If this hostility surprises us, that is because of our peculiar attitude to birds. In Britain in the twentieth century there has been an unprecedented surge of affection for 'our feathered friends', and birds enjoy the protection of a Royal Society which is one of our most popular charities. But this sympathy for birds did not exist in the past, and indeed does not exist today in many parts of the world. In ancient Greece birds were considered primarily as a source of food. So it is quite natural that the Servant-bird, on seeing two men, immediately jumps to the conclusion that they are bird-catchers (62); and the Birds of the chorus, on discovering that Tereus has admitted two men, are appalled that he has betrayed them to the enemy (327–35).

The two speeches in which Peisetairos wins over the Birds (462–538, 550–626) have the formal structure of an agon, although there is no individual opponent and Peisetairos delivers both speeches. In the first he uses comic logic to argue that birds are older than gods and were once kings over gods and everything else. The farmyard cock, for example, ruled Persia; that is why he is called 'the Persian bird' and wears a tiara on his head, and even now, when he crows in the morning, everyone obediently jumps out of bed and goes to work. Similar comic arguments 'prove' that the kite ruled Greece and the cuckoo Phoenicia, while human rulers and gods were under the surveillance of birds. That was in the old days; now the Birds have lost their former power, and in the second speech Peisetairos expounds his plan for getting it back. They must first construct walls around their territory, namely the air, to make it a fortified city. They must then demand that Zeus restore the kingship to them; if he refuses, the Birds will prevent gods from travelling through the air from heaven to earth to conduct love affairs with women in their customary manner. As for human beings, they will be required to give the Birds priority over gods when sacrificing; if they disobey, the Birds will eat up the seeds on their farms, but if they obey, the Birds will gobble up the insect pests and give them good signs. (Soothsayers predicted the future from observing the flight of birds.)

The Birds are delighted with the plan, and make Peisetairos their leader to carry it out. The individual characters then go off-stage, making way for the chorus to perform the parabasis; but the parabasis in this play, unlike earlier plays, does not digress into other topics, but makes further points about birds rather similar to those already made by Peisetairos. First comes a grandiose account of the origins of the universe, making birds out to be older than gods.

> There was Space, there was Night, there was Erebos black, and broad Tartaros,[14] in the beginning,
> But no Earth and no Air and no Heaven. And then, within Erebos' infinite bosom,
> The first birth that occurred was when black-winged Night brought forth an unfertilized wind-egg,
> Out of which, as the seasons came round in their turn, Love the ever-desirable sprouted
> With a glitter of gold from the wings on his back and resembling the wind's rapid eddies.
> And then Love was conjoined with winged Space down below in broad Tartaros, hidden in darkness,
> And so hatched out our race, and in this way we Birds were the first race brought up to the daylight.
> The race of immortals did not yet exist, until Love mated all things together.
> But when one mating after another occurred, Heaven came into being, and Ocean,
> And Earth, and then all the unperishing race of the blessed gods. Thus we are clearly
> Far older than all of those blessed ones are.
>
> (*Birds* 693–703)

Aristophanes is making fun of myths about the origin of the universe. The one which was probably the most widely known in his time was that recounted in Hesiod's *Theogony* 116–36. According to Hesiod the first thing to exist was Space (*khaos*); then came Earth, Tartaros, and Love; from Space were born Erebos and Night, and from Erebos and Night were born Sky (*aither*) and Day; Earth produced Heaven and Mountains and Sea (*pontos*), and then Earth and Heaven produced Ocean and the Titans. Aristophanes' comic cosmogony is similar to this, and his minor changes in the sequence of creation (putting Earth later, for example) are generally of no significance, but the comic point is that he has inserted the Birds in

[14] Erebos and Tartaros are two areas of underworld darkness, not very clearly distinguished from each other.

the middle of it, and has made some of the other entities birdlike by giving them wings (Night, Love, and most ridiculously Space) and making one of them lay an egg. The notion that some supernatural beings are winged is familiar, and Aristophanes naturally makes the most of it here. The egg may at first sight seem to be his own comic invention. However, an egg appeared in two other Greek cosmogonies, in poems which are now lost and cannot be dated with confidence but were probably composed before Aristophanes' time. In one, attributed to Epimenides (fr. 5), two Titans mated and produced an egg, from which other beings came forth. In the other, attributed to Orpheus, the creation of other things was due to Time, which fashioned a silvery egg in or from Sky; this probably means not that Time or Sky laid an egg but rather that the whole cosmos was at first oval, and is a notion of oriental origin.[15] Evidently these myths struck Aristophanes as ludicrous, and he seized on the egg as a suitable motif for inclusion in the comic cosmogony propounded by the Birds.

The style becomes less high-flown as the chorus goes on to list ways in which the Birds assist men. Birds, being children of Love, help lovers to win over their loved ones—by giving them birds as presents. The migrations of the Birds mark the changes of the seasons, showing when to plough, when to shear the sheep—and when a thief will need a warm cloak to wear as he goes out to steal a cloak. Birds are also used for prophecy and divination. This passage may also be regarded as a comic variation on themes of Hesiod, but based this time on *Works and Days*; for that poem too refers to the departure of the crane and the arrival of the swallow as signals to perform the tasks of autumn and of spring, and at the end of it there was once a passage, now lost, about divination by birds.[16] The whole anapaestic part of the parabasis leads to the conclusion that, if men honour the Birds as gods, the Birds will bring them health, wealth, happiness and success of every kind, and of course the proverbial ultimate Greek luxury—birds' milk! The second half of the parabasis includes jokes in a broader comic style about the advantages of being a bird, with some cracks about individual Athenians who

[15] *Orphica* 54, 57, 60, 70 Kern, Plutarch *Ethika* 636d; cf. M. L. West *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford 1983) 103–4, 111–12, 198–202.

[16] Hesiod *Works and Days* 448–52, 568–70, and the scholium on 828; cf. M. L. West's commentary (Oxford 1978) on 828.

would be better off as birds, and also the passage about flying away from the theatre (see p. 10).

CLOUDCUCKOOLAND

After the parabasis Peisetairos and Euelpides reappear with wings. They have now become birds, and are ready to begin establishing the new city. First a name is selected for it. The chorus acclaims Peisetairos' suggestion *Nephelokokkygia*, a marvellous compound of the words for 'cloud' and 'cuckoo', thus combining sky, birds, and vapidity. It is traditionally translated into English as Cloudcuckooland, although '-land' is a misleading termination, for the new foundation is not an area of countryside but an independent fortified city.[17] They select the farmyard cock to be the city's patron god, because of his pugnacity; and then Peisetairos sends Euelpides off to assist with the building of the walls, and to dispatch one herald to the gods above and another to human beings below. Euelpides now leaves the scene and never reappears. Thus Peisetairos alone is henceforth the organizer and leader of the Birds, and the actor who was playing Euelpides becomes free to take other roles.

There are certainly plenty of roles for him to take. *Birds* has more characters than any other play of Aristophanes, and many of them are what the modern cinema calls cameo roles, characters who make their mark in a single appearance lasting only a few minutes. They include a number of men who arrive from Athens wanting to participate in the affairs of the new city, each according to his own bent. The effect is that of a cavalcade of typical Athenian characters, satirically presented.

First, a Priest. Peisetairos brings him on to conduct a religious ceremony inaugurating the new city. He begins delivering a lengthy prayer, appropriately invoking birds instead of gods, but he invokes so many that Peisetairos interrupts and sends him away, for fear that the puny goat to be sacrificed will not be enough to feed them all.

[17] Cf. Sommerstein *Birds* 1 n. 2: '"Cloudcuckooland" is perhaps the only Aristophanic expression which has become part and parcel of modern English, without the vast majority of its users being in the least aware of its origin.' Sommerstein prefers 'Cloudcuckooville', but '-ville' suggests a provincial town rather than a city-state.

The joke here is the parody of long-winded prayers to numerous gods, and it may have been enhanced in the performance by imitation of priestly mannerisms or a 'churchy' tone of voice.

Second, a Poet. He claims to have written many beautiful songs in honour of Cloudcuckooland, and wants to be rewarded for them. He sings snatches of several; they are a farrago of high-flown lyric phrases, including some from Pindar, sounding absurd out of context. None of them refers to Cloudcuckooland, and since Peisetairos has not yet even completed the ceremony of inauguration it is obvious that the Poet has not really had time to write songs especially for it but has just brought out some material from his stock. Peisetairos gives him a present to get rid of him. Evidently there were in fact poets in Athens at this time who offered for sale songs for special events, like Pindar's odes at an earlier date, and Aristophanes is mocking them here.

Third, an Oracle-collector. He claims to have an oracle of Bakis referring to Cloudcuckooland, and quotes some of it; an important part is to the effect that the first man to reveal this oracle must be given sundry gifts. Peisetairos produces another oracle, that any intruding charlatan must be beaten; and he immediately carries out this instruction. This passage bears a strong resemblance to *Peace* 1043–1126 (see pp. 194–6). Probably the scene in *Peace* was a success and Aristophanes decided to use the same joke again.

The fourth of these characters, on the other hand, is a new one, and the only one of them who is a real named individual, not just a type. He is Meton the mathematician. In later times Meton was remembered as the man who devised an improved calendar, bringing the lunar months into a correct relationship with the solar year in a nineteen-year cycle (although the Athenians did not adopt it). But that is not mentioned in *Birds*. Here he appears as a town-planner, offering to design a street-plan in the air for Cloudcuckooland. He reels off a pseudo-scientific rigmarole, beginning with the statement that the air is like a baking-cover (cf. p. 120), and proceeding to draw a diagram with a curved ruler and a straight ruler 'so that the circle may become square' (1004–5), and straight streets lead to an agora in the middle like the rays of a star. Ingenious modern scholars have made sense of this, more or less, and reconstructed the diagram.[18] This is misguided. Even if Meton did draw a diagram in

[18] Cf. R. E. Wycherley *CQ* 31 (1937) 22–31, Sommerstein *Birds* 266.

the dust on the ground, most of the audience was too far away to see its details. Aristophanes has strung together a number of phrases which the real Meton may well have used, but which would have sounded absurd to ordinary people, notably 'the circle may become square'. Peisetairos does not understand them (1003), and the Athenian spectator is here expected to identify himself with Peisetairos, who chases Meton away as another charlatan. We may infer, though there is no other evidence, that not long before 414 the real Meton had produced a town-planning scheme which many Athenians regarded as unintelligible rubbish.[19]

Fifth, an Inspector (*episkopos*). There is not much other evidence about this type of official, but evidently inspectors were sent from Athens to supervise affairs in the cities of the Empire.[20] They did not reside in those cities permanently; the Inspector in our scene has been appointed by lot and sent out in accordance with a recent decree (1022–5), and indeed is annoyed at being made to come, because he is a politician and would rather be at a meeting of the Assembly back in Athens. He has brought a pair of voting-urns (1032, 1053), which probably means that he has come to establish lawcourts on the Athenian model. The joke is that Cloudcuckooland, which has barely been founded yet, is already being treated as part of the Athenian Empire and compelled to adopt Athenian institutions—including the very courts which Peisetairos and Euelpides left Athens in order to get away from.

The same thing is implied by the next intrusion. This sixth character is a Decree-seller. Like the Oracle-collector, he hopes to sell to Peisetairos copies of documents referring to Cloudcuckooland, but in this case the documents are Athenian laws and decrees. Athenian laws and decrees were inscribed on stone and set up in a public place for all to read, but anyone wishing to have the text for reference had either to copy it from the stone himself or buy a copy made by someone else. In *Birds* the Decree-seller has made such copies and is offering them for sale.[21] But when he

[19] But there is an alternative possibility, suggested by B. Zimmermann in *Ar. Hardt* 274: just as in *Clouds* Aristophanes uses Socrates as 'the sophist' and assigns to him various activities and beliefs not held by the real Socrates, in *Birds* he may be using Meton as 'the mathematician' and assigning to him a type of scheme which really emanated from some other mathematician.

[20] Cf. R. Meiggs *The Athenian Empire* (Oxford 1972) 212–13, 583–6.

[21] They are copies of laws and decrees already passed, not drafts for Cloud-

reads out some samples, they turn out to be very unfavourable to Cloudcuckooland. One lays down penalties for any Cloudcuckoolander who wrongs an Athenian (but not, presumably, vice versa). Another orders the Cloudcuckoolanders to use Athenian weights and measures—and decrees. A third lays down penalties for expelling Athenian officials. So again it appears that the Athenians are already treating Cloudcuckooland as a city under their control.[22]

Peisetairos chases away both the Inspector and the Decree-seller in a nice variation of the usual hitting scene: they come from opposite directions, and each time he beats away one of them to one side the other reappears behind him. The spectators will enjoy this slapstick, identifying themselves with Peisetairos.[23] Does this mean that they identify themselves with a city in the Empire downtrodden by the imperialist power? Surely not. The Athenians generally thought it right and proper that they should rule over others. If Aristophanes had wanted them to change their minds about that, the opposite point of view would have needed much fuller and more tactful presentation (comparable to Dikaiopolis' plea for peace in *Akharnians*). No, the point is rather that, whereas it is reasonable that other peoples like the Olophyxians (1042) should be kept under control, Peisetairos and Cloudcuckooland are quite different. They are independent and free. They are not to be bothered by these tiresome officials and profiteers. The six characters introduced in this part of the play (862–1057) are not merely a random collection of Athenian types; they are men who try to exploit others for their own advantage. That is why Peisetairos wants to be rid of them.

THE DESIRE FOR WINGS

Once Cloudcuckooland is established, many men wish to join it. A herald reports to Peisetairos that people on earth are already imitating birds, and thousands will soon be arriving here wanting wings. Peisetairos hastens to get a supply of wings ready, and immediately

cuckooland to consider passing. Sommerstein *Birds* 269 (on lines 1035–6) misleads slightly when he writes of Cloudcuckooland's 'own versions'.

[22] For parallels in real Athenian laws about cities in the Empire see Meiggs *The Athenian Empire* 586–7.

[23] Cf. MacDowell *Themes in Drama* 10 (1988) 7–8.

some would-be immigrants appear. The first arrival is a Young Man.

YOUNG MAN. I'm bird-mad, and I'm flying, and I want
To live with you! I'm longing for your laws!
PEISETAIROS. Which laws are those? The birds have many laws.
YOUNG MAN. All; specially the law of birds that says
It's good to throttle and to peck one's father!

(*Birds* 1344–8)

He is a rebellious youth who wants to beat up and murder his father, a proverbially wicked crime (cf. p. 126), and he has heard that young cocks fight their fathers and oust them from control. But this is not the kind of immigrant Peisetairos wants. Indeed one might have expected him simply to drive the Young Man away with a thrashing, as he has already driven away other intruders. But instead he gives some advice. First he says that there is also a different law among the birds: storks feed their fathers in old age. This damps the Young Man's keenness to be a bird. Peisetairos then proceeds to arm him.

PEISETAIROS. No, since you've come to wish us well, my friend,
I'll give you wings, just like an orphan bird,
And good advice, young man, 'such as I learned
When I was a boy'.[24] Don't beat your father up.
Take this wing; in the other hand, this spur;
Imagine this is a cock's crest that you have;
Serve in a garrison; go on a campaign;
Support yourself by earning service pay,
And let your father live. You are a fighter;
So fly off to the Thracian coast, fight there!
YOUNG MAN. By Dionysos, your advice seems good.
I'll take it.
PEISETAIROS. You'll be sensible, by Zeus!

(*Birds* 1360–71)

The reason for mentioning an orphan is that every year at the town Dionysia (the festival at which *Birds* was performed) the young sons of Athenians killed in war, who had been brought up at the city's expense and had just reached adulthood, were given a full set of armour and paraded in the theatre wearing it before the

[24] The quotation is adapted from Theognis 27–8.

performance of the tragedies.[25] In our scene, when the Young Man wants to imitate a pugnacious cock, Peisetairos gives him weapons under the names of parts of a cock. When he says 'Take this wing' and 'this spur', he gives him a shield and a spear, and the 'cock's crest' (which in English we call the comb) is a helmet with a crest.[26] Thus the Young Man now has the essential equipment of a hoplite and is ready to go off to war as a volunteer.[27] Peisetairos has found an ingenious way to get rid of him.[28]

The next arrival is (like Meton) a real person, Kinesias. Later in life Kinesias was a politician, but there is nothing in *Birds* about his political activity, which perhaps had not yet begun. Here he is simply a dithyrambic poet, rather like the Poet who appears earlier. He sings snatches of songs about flying, wings, birds, air, and wind, and wants to become a bird, but it is likely that the main comic point here is musical. Kinesias was an avant-garde composer, and another comic dramatist, Pherekrates, made Music, as a character, criticize him on this account.[29] So probably that is Aristophanes' target too: he makes his character Kinesias sing in a manner which somehow mocks or parodies the music of the real Kinesias, and the joke is lost to us because we do not have the music. It is also hard to make out from the text how Peisetairos responds to Kinesias' request for wings. Kinesias first expresses pleasure (1401) and then is suddenly indignant (1403), and it seems that Peisetairos brings him a pair of wings but then, instead of attaching them to his shoulders, uses them to beat him and chase him away.[30]

After him comes a Sycophant. We have already met in *Akharnians* sycophants who make profits for themselves by accusing traders of offences in Athens. This Sycophant likewise makes money by

[25] Aiskhines 3.154.

[26] The words 'in the other hand' show that the Young Man is not being given an actual wing and spur (which would go on the shoulder and heel), and 'imagine' shows that he does not get an actual cock's crest.

[27] He is evidently below the age at which men became liable to compulsory military service. Cf. H. D. Westlake *CR* 4 (1954) 90–4.

[28] Sommerstein *Birds* 288–9 (on lines 1360–1) discusses why Peisetairos 'would agree to give the young man wings', but his difficulty seems to arise from a misunderstanding. Peisetairos does not give the Young Man wings and does not admit him to Cloudcuckooland.

[29] Pherekrates 155.8–13. Cf. B. Zimmermann *Giornale Filologico Ferrarese* 12 (1989) 8–9.

[30] Cf. Zanetto *Uccelli* 292–3 (on lines 1401–2).

prosecuting, but he has a different sphere of operation: he prosecutes citizens of cities in the Empire overseas. For some types of case, when an Athenian prosecuted a citizen of a subject-ally, the trial was held in Athens.[31] Peisetairos regards this as a poor way for an able-bodied man to make a living (1430–5), but the Sycophant insists that sycophancy is a tradition in his family, and he will be able to carry it on much better if he has wings.

SYCOPHANT. I won't disgrace my ancestry.
I'm a hereditary sycophant.
So fit me out with swift, light wings, a hawk's
Or kestrel's, so that I can serve a summons
On foreigners, then prosecute them here,
Then fly back there again.
PEISETAIROS. I understand.
You mean the foreigner will lose his case
Before he gets here.
SYCOPHANT. Yes, you understand.
PEISETAIROS. Then, while he's sailing here, you fly back there
To seize his property.
SYCOPHANT. You've got the point.
I need to spin round like a top.
PEISETAIROS. A top!
I understand. In fact I've just the thing,
By Zeus: some splendid Kerkyraian—wings!
SYCOPHANT. Oh help, you've got a whip!
PEISETAIROS. No, these are wings
With which I'm going to make you spin today!

(*Birds* 1451–65)

A Kerkyraian whip was a large ivory-handled whip with a double thong. A whip is needed to make a top spin, and Peisetairos calls it 'wings' because it makes the Sycophant fly.

Although Peisetairos was ready to give wings to a large number of men and admit them to Cloudcuckooland (1308–36), the only ones seen on-stage are unwelcome characters who are turned away. But that does not mean that, after all, no one is to be admitted. The reason why we do not see anyone being admitted is simply that Aristophanes thought that routine admissions would make a dull

[31] Cf. MacDowell *Law* 224–8.

scene, whereas chasing people away would be more entertaining for the audience.

THE GODS

The climax of *Birds* is the confrontation with the gods. From the start it was an essential part of Peisetairos' plan that the Birds would vanquish the gods by intercepting sacrifices and so cutting off their food supply (186–93). A herald was to be sent up to the gods to declare war unless Zeus surrendered his power to the Birds (554–6, 843). But that herald seems not yet to have been sent, and the Birds have only just finished building the walls to protect the air, which is their territory, when a messenger-bird rushes up in alarm.

MESSENGER. A god has flown in through the gates just now
Into the air! It's one of Zeus's gods,
Slipped past the jackdaws on day sentry-duty!

(*Birds* 1172–4)

The Birds' army is called out and they prepare to resist the invader. But by a delightful comic bathos the invader turns out to be a most ladylike goddess, Iris the rainbow, who has never heard of Cloudcuckooland and has no idea why men have ceased sacrificing to the gods. Peisetairos informs her forcefully that the Birds have replaced the gods, and she flies away. The next visitor from above is Prometheus. In myth Prometheus was punished by Zeus for his friendly assistance to mankind, and so Aristophanes has chosen this god as the one to give away the gods' plan to the Birds. His arrival is comical: he is so anxious that Zeus, looking down from the sky, shall not see him that he has his head covered by a cloak, he wonders whether there are clouds overhead (Zeus could not see through a cloud!), and eventually he converses with Peisetairos under an umbrella. He explains that the gods are getting hungry for lack of sacrifices. The barbarian gods, who live in the inland part of heaven (1522), are threatening to march against Zeus unless he gets the trading ports opened up. Peisetairos is surprised to hear that barbarian gods exist, as well he may be: Aristophanes has just invented them, describing heaven as if it were an area like Thrace, with Greek settlements along the coast and savage tribes inland. Indeed Prometheus says that the barbarian gods are called Triballians. The

Triballians were a real non-Greek people living in what is now western Bulgaria. In Aristophanes' time the Athenians can have known little about them, but possibly there had been some report about them in the Assembly recently, making the joke topical. Prometheus goes on to give Peisetairos some advice.

PROMETHEUS. Envoys for making peace will soon arrive
From Zeus and the Triballians inland.
But don't you make a treaty, not unless
Zeus yields the sceptre to the Birds again
And gives you Basileia as your wife.
PEISETAIROS. Who's Basileia?
PROMETHEUS. She's a lovely girl.
She's the custodian of the thunderbolt
Of Zeus, and absolutely everything—
Wise counsel, law and order, good behaviour,
Dockyards, abuse, paymasters, and three-obols!
PEISETAIROS. So she looks after all he has?
PROMETHEUS. That's right.
If you get her from him, you've got it all.

(*Birds* 1532–43)

The sceptre and Basileia together represent all the power of Zeus. The sceptre is the symbol of sovereignty over the world, and it is to belong to the whole community of Birds. Basileia represents administrative authority, both in general policy and in organization of details (and once again the joke is that the details are of the same kinds as in Athens: ships, slander, and pay for jurors); this will belong to Peisetairos alone, as the Birds' leader. Scholars have worried about the exact nature of Basileia: is she a person or a personification?[32] It used to be taken for granted that she was a personification of Royalty or Sovereignty, much like the personifications of other abstract notions in other plays (especially those appearing in the form of girls with whom the hero makes merry at the end of a play, such as the Peace-terms in *Horsemen* and Vintage in *Peace*). Against this interpretation it has been objected that the metrical form of the word, with a short final alpha, signifies not an abstraction but a person, 'queen' or 'princess'. Recent writers have

[32] Newiger *Metapher* 92–102 discusses this question at length, but his interpretation of Basileia as primarily a divine bride for Peisetairos does not give sufficient weight to 1538–41.

therefore regarded the character as a goddess named Queen or Princess; either this is an alternative name for a known goddess, probably Athena or Hera, or Aristophanes has simply invented a goddess. The identification with Athena or Hera is not very plausible: when Peisetairos demands Basileia as his wife he explicitly distinguishes her from Hera (1633–4), and also refers to Athena (1653) without any suggestion that she is the same person, and it is unlikely that an Athenian audience would have liked to see their national virgin goddess being married to a comic hero. Inventing a goddess, on the other hand, was certainly a possibility; compare Amphitheos in *Akharnians*, who seems to be an invented god (see p. 52). Personification of Royalty need not be absolutely ruled out, for the metrical argument is not conclusive.[33] But we do not really have to choose between a personification and a person, because Greek gods are regularly both. Just as Aphrodite is an individual goddess who embodies love, and Ares an individual god who embodies war, so Basileia can be an individual goddess invented by Aristophanes to embody government.

Soon after Prometheus' departure the three official envoys from the gods arrive: Poseidon, Herakles, and a Triballian god. Three was a normal number for envoys sent to negotiate with another state, but Aristophanes has cleverly selected three who make a strong contrast with one another. Poseidon, the brother of Zeus, is generally thought of as the god of the sea, earthquakes, and horses, but none of those spheres of activity is mentioned here. Here he is dignified, conservative, and aristocratic. He is dismayed, for example, that the Triballian whom the gods have elected to accompany him does not know the proper (that is, the Athenian gentleman's) way to wear his cloak: 'Democracy, what will you bring us to?' (1570). Herakles, the son of Zeus, in myth is the prototype of the physically strong hero. Comedy therefore presents him as all brawn and no brain, with a tremendous appetite for food. This characterization of Herakles was a comic convention, not an

[33] In other authors 'royalty' is βασιλεία, with long final alpha, but there is no passage in which Aristophanes certainly uses that form, and, for all we can prove to the contrary, he may have regarded βασίλεια, with short final alpha, as a permissible form for 'royalty' as well as for 'queen'. The possibility that the length of such alphas was considered variable, at least by Aristophanes, is indicated by *Birds* 604, where he gives ὑγιεία a long final alpha although other authors make it short.

innovation by Aristophanes, who claims in earlier plays to have risen above it (*Wasps* 60, *Peace* 741) but nevertheless exploits it not only here in *Birds* but again later in *Frogs* and in the lost *Aiolosikon*. The Triballian god, on the other hand, is purely an Aristophanic invention. He is hardly characterized at all, and his dramatic function is to reduce the negotiation to comic confusion by speaking unintelligibly.

The whole scene is a brilliant display of comic persuasion. Peisetairos has two aims: the sceptre of sovereignty is to be handed over by the gods to the Birds, and Basileia is to be given to him as his wife. His strategy is to divide the enemy: Herakles is stupid, and can be duped more easily than Poseidon. To win over Herakles, Peisetairos arranges to be cooking a delicious meal just as the gods arrive, and invites them to lunch on condition that they hand over the sceptre. On those terms Herakles can hardly wait to agree; Poseidon demurs; and Herakles interprets the Triballian's barbaric babble as supporting himself, so that Poseidon is outvoted by two to one. Only then does Peisetairos produce his second demand, for Basileia. This time he exploits Herakles' stupidity rather than his greed, and bamboozles him with legal argument.

POSEIDON [*to Herakles*]. Fool! Don't you realize you're being cheated?
And it's yourself you're harming. If Zeus dies
After he's given the sovereignty to them,
You'll be a pauper; all of it comes to you,
The property that Zeus leaves at his death.
PEISETAIROS [*to Herakles*]. You poor chap! How he's trying to outwit you!
Come over here and let me tell you something.
Your uncle's trying to deceive you, mate.
By law you don't inherit from your father,
Since you're a bastard, not legitimate.
HERAKLES. Me? Bastard? What d'you mean?
PEISETAIROS. That's right, by Zeus!
Your mother was a foreigner. How could
Athena, as a daughter, be the heiress
If she had brothers of legitimate birth?
HERAKLES. What if my father leaves his property
To me, as bastard's share?
PEISETAIROS. The law won't let him.
Poseidon here, who's raising up your hopes,
Will claim your father's property instead,

As being his brother and legitimate.
I'll tell you what the law of Solon says.
[*He brings out a legal document.*] 'A bastard is not to have right of kinship, if there are legitimate children. If there are no legitimate children, the next of kin are to share the property.'
HERAKLES. So I don't share my father's property?
PEISETAIROS. You don't, by Zeus! Has he inducted you
To be a member of his phratry yet?
HERAKLES. Not me, he hasn't. I'd been wondering why.

(*Birds* 1641–70)

The fun here arises from speaking of the gods as if they were ordinary human beings, and Athenians at that. Really Zeus is immortal, but here that fact (as most Greeks believed it to be) is ignored; so when he dies, what will become of his property (which happens, in his case, to include the sovereignty of the world)? It will be inherited in accordance with law. Aristophanes develops the joke by introducing one legal rule after another, all of them genuine rules of the Athenian law of inheritance. The property will be inherited by the son of the deceased, but only if the son is of legitimate birth; a law of Perikles forbids marriage between an Athenian and a foreigner (and Alkmena, mother of Herakles, is comically called a foreigner because she was human although Zeus is a god); if there are no legitimate sons, a daughter may be the heiress (*epikleros*), but the heiress and the property may be claimed by the nearest legitimate male relative; a phratry (brotherhood or clan) admits only men of legitimate birth, so that membership is good evidence of legitimacy.[34] All these rules will have been familiar to the Athenian audience, whose hilarity will have increased each time Peisetairos produces yet another rule of law and applies it to the gods.

Herakles is convinced, the Triballian utters some more gibberish which is taken to signify his agreement, and so Poseidon finally gives in. It is agreed that Basileia shall be given in marriage to Peisetairos. The play concludes with a wedding scene,[35] and thus Peisetairos has triumphed. He is indeed the most successful of all comic heroes, since he ends up as the ruler of the world.

The gods in this play, as in others (especially Dionysos and Herakles in *Frogs*, and Hermes in *Peace* and *Wealth*), are used by Aristophanes as comic characters. They are presented ignominiously; they are undignified or unscrupulous, cowardly or greedy. They are not characters to be admired or imitated. Aristophanes' treatment of them seems, by our standards, to be neither religious nor pious. Many modern readers have found this puzzling. One possible explanation is that he did not believe in these gods, and did not expect most of his audience to believe in them either; for him, as for Offenbach, the traditional Greek gods were simply a set of ready-made comic characters. But this explanation is unlikely to be right. The evidence that most ordinary Athenians believed in the gods is strong. We need only point to the general alarm that arose in 415 BC, only a year before the performance of *Birds*, when the images of Hermes in Athenian streets were mutilated and the Eleusinian Mysteries were profaned. Many Athenians believed that the gods, especially Hermes, would be offended at those acts and, if not propitiated, would exact vengeance, perhaps by destroying the great fleet which was setting out for Sicily. Yet evidently they did not believe that Hermes or Poseidon or Dionysos would be offended and exact vengeance if made to look ridiculous in a comic play. Why did they regard the cases as different? The best explanation is that the performances of comedies at the Dionysiac festivals were regarded as occasions when laughter at anyone, even the gods, was appropriate. The gods, like other powerful people, were expected to accept on that occasion mockery which they might not tolerate at other times.[36]

A CASTLE IN THE AIR

Birds more than any of the other plays has suffered from over-interpretation. 'Professor after Professor has advanced some new theory which if satisfactory to its author has proved satisfactory to nobody else.'[37] Not every theory will be mentioned here, but it is worth while to notice a few which are good examples of different approaches.

[34] For a summary of Athenian marriage and inheritance law see MacDowell *Law* 84–108.
[35] On the wedding scene see Hofmann *Mythos* 138–60.

[36] Cf. Dover *Ar. Comedy* 31–3 on the ordinary man's need for an opportunity to assert himself against the superhuman powers which dominate the world.
[37] Rogers *Birds* xvi–xvii.

In the nineteenth century the play was sometimes interpreted as a political allegory, most notably by Süvern.[38] At the time of its first performance the Athenians had recently dispatched their great expedition against Syracuse, with hopes of conquering the whole of Sicily. Süvern argues that the setting up of Cloudcuckooland is a satirical allegory of that over-ambitious scheme, and that the Birds' device of isolating the gods reflects an Athenian plan to isolate the Peloponnese. He regards the Birds as representing the Athenians and the gods the Peloponnesians: Poseidon the sea-god stands for Corinth, Herakles for Boiotia, and Zeus for Sparta; the character of Peisetairos contains elements drawn both from Alkibiades the instigator of the Sicilian expedition and from Gorgias the clever orator, Euelpides resembles Gorgias' adherent Polos, and Tereus resembles Lamakhos. Critics have found little difficulty in pointing out specific details of the play which conflict with this interpretation. For example, at the start of the play Peisetairos and Euelpides, when they come to the Birds, are not coming to the Athenians as Gorgias did, but abandoning them.[39] But the more fundamental objection to this approach is that Aristophanes does nothing to show the audience that the play is allegorical. How he would have done so, if he had wished, can be seen from the trial of the dog in *Wasps*, where the two dogs are called by names that are nearly the same as the names of Kleon and Lakhes, and references to Sicily, cities, and soldiers are thoroughly mixed in with the references to dogs, cheese, and kitchen utensils. *Birds* has no such clues to an allegory, and it is not good enough to say that the allegory is concealed by 'the mysterious veil which was thrown over the main idea of the whole play'.[40] The intention of an allegory has to be made clear, not veiled.

A more moderate political interpretation has been preferred in recent years by some scholars, of whom the best example is Newiger.[41] He does not identify particular characters in the play

[38] J. W. Süvern *Essay on the Birds of Aristophanes* (trans. W. R. Hamilton, London 1835). This type of interpretation is not yet extinct; for a recent example of identification of Peisetairos with Alkibiades, based largely on far-fetched word-play, see M. Vickers *Historia* 38 (1989) 267–99.

[39] Süvern attempts to answer some of these criticisms in the appendices to the English translation of his *Essay*.

[40] Süvern *Essay* 160.

[41] H.-J. Newiger in *Ἀρετῆς μνήμη, ἀφιέρωμα εἰς μνήμην τοῦ Κ. Ι. Βουρβέρη* (Athens 1983) 47–57.

with particular historical individuals, but he does consider that the play as a whole refers to the Sicilian expedition and is intended as a criticism of Athenian imperialism. He considers that all Aristophanes' plays are aimed at some political or social or intellectual target, and that the Sicilian expedition was the obvious target for criticism in 414. But there is really no evidence or probability that people in Athens in that year were so preoccupied with the activities of their troops at Syracuse that they would assume every comedy they saw to be about this subject; and if they did not assume it in advance, they could not know that a play was about this subject unless they were told. There is in fact no mention in *Birds* of the Sicilian expedition or of Syracuse. There is one joke about a summons-server arriving by ship, an event that did befall Alkibiades (145–7), and there are two passing jokes about Nikias, neither of which necessarily refers to anything which had happened in Sicily (363, 639); all three jokes are quite incidental and might not bring Sicily to the audience's mind at all. The main enterprise in *Birds* is to abandon Athens and found a new city somewhere else; that is quite different from the Sicilian expedition, which was intended to build up the power of Athens by conquering another powerful city already in existence. In short, the theory that Aristophanes is somehow satirizing the Sicilian expedition is unconvincing, because he does not indicate to the audience that he is doing so. Even Newiger concedes that 'at first sight' the critical and sceptical purpose of the play may have been concealed from the audience by the jubilant ending. I must therefore re-emphasize that for the Athenian audience the first sight of a play was the only sight. With rare exceptions, they neither saw a second performance nor studied a written text. Aristophanes knew that any satirical point he wished to make must be clear and obvious.

Recently Hubbard has presented another variant of the political interpretation, regarding the play as a reaction to the religious scandals of the previous year (the mutilation of the Hermai and the profanation of the Mysteries) and to the political groups which were believed to have planned them.[42] On this view it 'dramatizes not only the abandonment of Athenian democracy, but also the overthrow of the city's traditional religion', and, like *Clouds*, is an attack on the sophists to whom the decline in religious belief is attributed. But

[42] Hubbard *Mask* 158–82.

this too is unconvincing. At the beginning of the play Peisetairos and Euelpides have left Athens to avoid prosecution for debt, not for sacrilege as Hubbard alleges, and there are no clear references at all to either the mutilation or the profanation. Certainly the play contains some jokes about sophists, but it is very far from identifying Peisetairos with them. There is also a fundamental reason why all interpretations of this type must be rejected. The spectators are encouraged to identify themselves with Peisetairos and to side with him against his opponents throughout the play, and at the end he is triumphantly successful. The play therefore cannot be an attack on the kind of thing Peisetairos does. It is rather an encouragement to follow his example—if only it were possible.

This objection may be made also to the interpretation put forward by Ničev, who argues that the basic idea of *Birds* is the degeneration of democracy: Peisetairos begins as a democratic leader but ends as a tyrant.[43] He places much emphasis on the moment when Herakles first notices that Peisetairos is cooking some meat.

HERAKLES. What sort of meat is this?
PEISETAIROS. These are some birds
Who were condemned for rising up against
The democratic birds.

(*Birds* 1583–5)

Ničev considers that Peisetairos, under the name of democracy, is really an absolute ruler who condemns his opponents to death. Perhaps he (writing in Sofia) has been too much influenced by the modern history of eastern Europe, and he makes too much of a brief joke. In ancient Athens a normal kind of meat for a first-rate private dinner (as distinct from a religious festival) was small birds.[44] So naturally this is what Peisetairos is preparing in order to tempt Herakles—but how can it be right for birds to be cooked by birds? Aristophanes invents a clever explanation to get out of the difficulty: these particular birds were traitors, and execution was the normal penalty for treason in Athens as elsewhere. There is no reason why this penalty should not have been imposed democratically; nothing in the text supports Ničev's assumption that Peisetairos personally

[43] A. Ničev *Euphrosyne* 17 (1989) 9–30. A similar view is held by Bowie *Aristophanes* 168–72.

[44] e.g. *Akharnians* 1007, *Clouds* 339, *Peace* 1149, 1197.

imposed it. But anyway the line is merely a joke which passes immediately. There is no further reference to democracy, whether real or pretended. At the end of the play Peisetairos is hailed as the ruler of the world, such as Zeus had been before. This is not a degenerate position, but an admirable and enviable one.

Another approach to the play gives it a basis which is not political but literary. This view was already current in antiquity.

Some say that the poet confuted the fantastic tales in tragedies in other works, and in the present work, to show that the compilation of the Gigantomachy was stale, gave to birds a dispute with gods about sovereignty.

(*Birds hyp.* ii)

The suggestion is that, just as *Akharnians* mocks Euripides' *Telephos*, so *Birds* mocks the Gigantomachy. The Gigantomachy was a myth recounting the attempt of the Giants to overthrow the gods. There must have been an epic poem on this theme, although nothing survives of it now. Recently this interpretation of *Birds* has been taken up and developed by Hofmann,[45] who points out that the gods' defeat of the Giants is mentioned in the play (824–5) and two individual Giants, Porphyrion and Kebriones, are also named (553, 1252); in one of those places (553) a scholiast remarks 'He deliberately mentioned the fighters of the gods, because they themselves will also fight the gods'. Actually the Birds resemble the Titans rather than the Giants. Both the Titans and the Giants were children of the Earth; but the Titans, including Kronos, were themselves gods, who were attacked and deposed by Zeus and other gods of the younger generation, whereas the Giants were merely uncouth mortals who attacked the gods. The Birds, like the Titans but unlike the Giants, are represented as having ruled before Zeus and the other gods. But here the distinction between the Giants and the Titans may be unimportant. The two myths were so similar that they had already become confused by Aristophanes' time. A more serious difficulty is that neither myth is really much like *Birds*. The Giants and the Titans both opposed the gods by brute force, and were defeated. The Birds oppose the gods by clever strategy, under the guidance of Peisetairos, and are victorious. The scholia do not tell us that Aristophanes quotes or parodies any words of a poem

[45] Hofmann *Mythos* 79–90. Cf. also Zannini Quirini *Nephelokokkygia* 47–87.

about the Gigantomachy. Although he may well have had the Gigantomachy at the back of his mind, there is no strong evidence that any part of *Birds* copies it at all closely, still less that parody or mockery of it was the main point of the play.

Another popular interpretation, well expounded by Ehrenberg,[46] sees the play not so much as an allegory of the real Athens and its activities but rather as a presentation of the ideal city. Cloudcuckooland, on this view, is Athens as Aristophanes would like it to be. An opposite interpretation has also been proposed: Cloudcuckooland is Athens as Aristophanes hopes it will not be, but fears it soon will be if present trends continue unchecked.[47] Why can the play be read in two ways so contradictory? The reason is that Aristophanes gives so little information about what Cloudcuckooland, when established, is actually like, and readers tend to fill in the picture with their own ideas. Consider the evidence. At the start Peisetairos and Euelpides are seeking a carefree place with no lawcourts. When they are asked what they want to do there, their answers mention a wedding-feast and sex (128–42). The attractions of the life of birds are that they do not use money and that their meals are like wedding-feasts (155–61). Later there are passages about the usefulness of wings, which enable you to get around quickly to do whatever you want to do, and the Birds' situation in the air enables them to attain power over both gods and men; but those are means, not ends. Nothing substantial is said about the organization of society in Cloudcuckooland; the brief reference to democracy is, as we have seen, a momentary joke, not a description of the constitution. At the end Peisetairos prepares food for a wedding-feast and marries Basileia. Thus, if we ask what the inhabitants of Cloudcuckooland actually do with their time, the only answers provided are feasting and sex. These are just the same activities as at the end of several other Aristophanic plays, and they are not enough to be regarded as a blueprint for the ideal city, still less as a depiction of the deteriorating city. Cloudcuckooland turns out to be much the same as Dikaiopolis' peacetime Athens; but

[46] Ehrenberg *People* 57–60. Cf. also E.-R. Schwinge *Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft* 3 (1977) 52–6, B. Zimmermann ibid. 9 (1983) 66–72.

[47] This is the main conclusion of Zannini Quirini *Nephelokokkygia*. Cf. also W. Arrowsmith *Arion* 1 (1973) 119–67, E. Corsini in *Atti del Convegno Nazionale di Studi su la città ideale nella tradizione classica e biblico-cristiana* (ed. R. Uglione, Turin 1987) 57–136.

whereas Dikaiopolis attains it by a method which the Athenians collectively could actually have adopted, namely making a peace treaty, Peisetairos attains it by acquiring wings and fortifying the air, which in real life are impossible.

But although positive statements about life in Cloudcuckooland amount to so little, there is more emphasis on what it does not have. When the new city is founded, Peisetairos has first of all to get rid of people who are not wanted: a priest, a poet, an oracle-collector, a town-planner, an inspector, a decree-seller, a rebellious youth, another poet, and a sycophant. The most important thing about life in Cloudcuckooland is not what people do there, but the freedom from obnoxious and interfering persons. This lends attraction to Murray's interpretation of *Birds* as a play of escape: 'It seems to be just an "escape" from worry and the sordidness of life, away into the land of sky and clouds and poetry.'[48] But Murray goes too far. For one thing, it will not do to call Cloudcuckooland the land of poetry; poetry is the only profession of which Peisetairos expels not just one but two practitioners. Murray attempts to explain the play as a reaction to 'the shadow of an awful apprehension' arising from the religious scandals and accusations of the previous year—not (like Hubbard) as an allegory or parody of them, but simply as an escape from them.[49] But there is no evidence that the Athenians were still worried about that topic in particular in the spring of 414. What the play shows is not an escape from a specific religious or political or military situation,[50] but the escape of an ordinary man from the selfish busybodies who get in his way in everyday life. In this sense it is a play of escape.

The spectators in the theatre are expected to sympathize and to identify themselves with Peisetairos and Euelpides from the start, and this attitude is confirmed by the scenes in which Peisetairos disposes of obnoxious intruders. Everyone in the audience (except the few who themselves are oracle-collectors, sycophants, and so on) is naturally on his side in those scenes. Some modern critics have found this part of the play inconsistent with the beginning: at the start Peisetairos is looking for a peaceful place to live, but then

[48] Murray *Aristophanes* 156.

[49] Ibid. 142–3.

[50] Cf. Dover *Ar. Comedy* 145–6.

he becomes aggressive.[51] That is a misunderstanding. He does not seek out his opponents in order to attack them; it is they who intrude upon him.[52] In order to make Cloudcuckooland a peaceful place he has to get rid of the men who are preventing it from being so. He needs power, including power over the gods, to secure peace and prosperity.

The play shows this ordinary Athenian accomplishing what the ordinary Athenians in the audience can only dream of doing: getting control over everyone else, and using it for his own personal pleasure. It enables the spectator to imagine himself doing the same. Peisetairos achieves this by becoming a bird, and the use of wings is a brilliant dramatic stroke by Aristophanes. Many people have at some time dreamed of rising off the ground effortlessly and weightlessly, and flying out of trouble is a constant motif in literature both ancient (for example, Daidalos and Ikaros) and modern (for example, Peter Pan and Wendy). Getting wings is the perfect image for leaving worries behind and doing what one has always longed to do, and the charm of *Birds* is that it is a dramatization of dreams coming true.

[51] See especially G. Paduano *Studi Classici e Orientali* 22 (1973) 115–44.

[52] The Priest is an exception, but hardly a significant one. Peisetairos does take the initiative of inviting him to perform a religious ceremony, but then dismisses him because he performs it in an unsatisfactory way (848–94).

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford New York
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Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi
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Mexico City Nairobi Paris Singapore
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and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Oxford is a trade mark of Oxford University Press

Published in the United States by
Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published in hardback and paperback 1995
Reprinted in paperback 1996

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Aristophanes and Athens: an introduction to the plays.
Douglas M. MacDowell.
Includes bibliographical references.
1. Aristophanes—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Greek drama (Comedy)—History and criticism. 3. Aristophanes—Knowledge—Greece—Athens. 4. Athens (Greece)—In literature. I. Title.
PA3879.M23 1995 882'.01—dc20 95-3669
ISBN 0-19-872158-7 (Hbk)
ISBN 0-19-872159-5 (Pbk)

Printed in Great Britain
on acid-free paper by
Biddles Ltd., Guildford and King's Lynn

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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS