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ARISTOPHANES THE BIRDS

Translation with Introduction
and Notes

Jeffrey Henderson



Aristophanes' The Birds

**Translated with
Introduction and Notes**

Jeffrey Henderson
Boston University

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INTRODUCTION

Aristophanes and Old Comedy

Aristophanes of Athens, the earliest comic playwright from whom whole works survive, was judged in antiquity to be the foremost poet of Old Attic Comedy, a theatrical genre of which he was one of the last practitioners and of which his eleven surviving plays are our only complete examples. His plays are valued principally for the exuberance of their wit and fantasy, for the purity and elegance of their language, and for the light they throw on the domestic and political life of Athens in an important era of its history. Legend has it that when the Syracusan tyrant Dionysius wanted to inform himself about “the republic of the Athenians,” Plato sent him the plays of Aristophanes.

Little is known about Aristophanes’ life apart from his theatrical career. He was born *ca.* 447/6, the son of one Philippus of the urban deme Cydathenaeum and the tribe Pandionis, and he died probably between 386 and 380. By his twenties his hair had thinned or receded enough that his rivals could call him bald. He seems to have had land-holdings on, or some other connection with, the island of Aegina, a connection that detractors and enemies exploited early in his career in an attempt to call his Athenian citizenship into question. In the 420s he was twice prosecuted by a fellow demesman, the popular politician Cleon, for the political impropriety of two of his plays (*Babylonians* of 426 and *Knights* of 424), but neither time was he convicted. Early in the fourth century he represented his tribe in the prestigious government position of Councillor. Four comic poets of the fourth century, Araros, Philetaerus, Philippus and Nicostratus, are reputed in ancient sources to be his sons.

In the dialogue *Symposium* Plato portrays Aristophanes as being at home among the social and intellectual elite of Athens. Although the historical truth of Plato’s portrayal is uncertain, Aristophanes’ plays do generally espouse the social, moral and political sentiments of contemporary upper-class conservatives: nostalgia for the good old days of the early democracy,

which defeated the Persians and built the empire; dismay at the decadence, corruption and political divisiveness of his own day; hostility toward the new breed of populist leaders who emerged after the death of the aristocratic Perikles in 429; impatience with the leadership and slow progress of the Peloponnesian War (431-404), particularly when it threatened the interests of the landowning classes; and unhappiness about many of the artistic and intellectual trends of his own day, especially those he regarded as harming the high art of drama. There is no question that Aristophanes' comic expression of such views reflected, and to a degree shaped, community opinion, and that comedy could occasionally have a distinct social and political impact. But the fact that Aristophanes emerged politically and artistically unscathed from the war, from two oligarchic revolutions (411 and 404), and from two democratic restorations (411 and 403) suggests that on the whole his role in Athenian politics was more satirical, moral(istic) and poetical than practical; and the perennial popularity of his plays would seem to indicate that the sentiments they express were broadly shared at least among the theatrical public.

The period of Old Comedy at Athens began in 486 BC, when comedy first became part of the festival of the Greater Dionysia; by convention it ended in 388 BC, when Aristophanes produced his last play. During this period some 600 comedies were produced. We know the titles of some fifty comic poets and the titles of some 300 plays. We have eleven complete plays by Aristophanes, the first one (*Acharnians*) dating from 425, and several thousand fragments of other plays by Aristophanes and other poets, most of them only a line or so long and very few deriving from plays written before 440.

The principal occasions for the production of comedies were the Greater Dionysia, held in late March or early April, and (from 440) the Lenaea, held in late January or early February. These were national festivals honoring the wine-god Dionysus, whose cult from very early times had included mimetic features. The theatrical productions that were the highlight of the festivals were competitions in which poets, dancers, actors, producers and musicians competed for prizes that were awarded by judges at the close of the festival. The Greater Dionysia was held in the Theater of Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis, which accommodated some 17,000 spectators, including both Athenian and foreign visitors. The Lenaea, which only Athenians attended, was held elsewhere in the city (we do not know where). By the fourth century the Lenaea was held in the Theater of Dionysus also, but it is unclear when the relocation occurred.

At these festivals comedy shared the theater with tragedy and satyr-drama, genres that had been produced at the Greater Dionysia since the sixth century. The first "city" contest in tragedy is dated to 534, when the victorious actor-poet was Thespis (from whose name actors are still called

Aristophanes' Birds

CHARACTERS

SPEAKING CHARACTERS

Euelpides, an Athenian	Second Messenger
Peisetaerus, an Athenian	Iris
Slave of Tereus	First Herald
Tereus, turned hoopoe	Father Beater
Priest	Cinesias, a dithyrambic poet
Poet	Informer
Oracle Collector	Prometheus
Meton	Poseidon
Inspector, from Athens	Heracles
Decree Seller	Triballian, a god
First Messenger	Second Herald

SILENT CHARACTERS

Xanthias and	Hoopoe, a bird
Manodorus/Manes, Slaves	Gobbler, a bird
of Euelpides and Peisetaerus	Procne, turned nightingale
Slaves of Tereus	Piper, costumed as a raven
Flamingo, a bird	Slaves, as archers and slingers
Mede, a bird	Princess

CHORUS of Birds

PROLOGUE

(Euelpides, Peisetaerus, Slave, Tereus)

Euelpides^o

Is it straight ahead you're pointing us, toward that tree there?

Peisetaerus^o

You blasted bird! This one keeps croaking "go back!"

1 A fictitious name meaning "Confident."

2 A fictitious name meaning "Persuader of His Comrade(s)."

Euelpides

You bastard, why all this trekking back and forth?
We're goners if we just wander an aimless path.

Peisetaerus

I'm pitiful! Imagine letting a crow convince me
to take a hike of more than a hundred miles! 5

Euelpides

And as for me, I'm hapless, letting a jackdaw
convince me to pound the nails right off my toes!

Peisetaerus

Now even I'm unsure where on earth we are.
Think you could find our native land from here? 10

Euelpides

God no, from here not even Execesitides could!°

Peisetaerus

Damn!

Euelpides

Travel your own side of the road, my friend.

Peisetaerus

He's really done us dirty, that man from the bird market
who sells by the tray, that crazy Philocrates.° 15
He claimed these two would point the way to Tereus,°
the hoopoe who once was human and became a bird;
and he sold us that Son of Tharreleides° there,
the jackdaw, for one obol, and this crow here for three.
But they turn out to know nothing at all but nipping.
What are you gaping at this time? Do you mean to take us 20
into these cliffs somewhere? There's no passage here.

Euelpides

My god, there isn't even a pathway here.

11 Athenian citizenship required native Athenian parents; Execesitides (otherwise unknown) was evidently vulnerable to the charge of having Carian ancestry, cf. line 764.

14 To judge from lines 1076-1083, Philocrates (otherwise unknown) was a prominent wholesaler of birds.

15 In this myth, as dramatized by the tragic poet Sophocles probably in the late 430's, Tereus, King of Thrace, on his way to wed the Athenian princess Procne, raped her sister Philomela, whose tongue he cut out to prevent her from telling anyone. But she depicted the crime on an embroidery she sent to Procne, and the sisters avenged themselves by serving Tereus' son Itys to him for dinner. When Tereus chased the sisters with a sword, the gods changed him into a hoopoe, Procne into a nightingale, and Philomela into a swallow. The nightingale's song was regarded as a lament for Itys.

17 Evidently a man resembling a jackdaw, which is small and noisy.

One of Aristophanes' greatest comedies available with notes and introduction by Jeffrey Henderson, one of the most important scholars and translators of Greek comedy.

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