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Aristophanes

Birds

414 BC

Translator's Note

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Note that in the following translation the normal numbers refer to this text, while the numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text. Links to explanatory endnotes are indicated by an asterisk (*).

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Historical Note

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

Birds

Dramatis Personae

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

Scene: A rugged, treed wilderness area up in the rocky hills. Enter Pisthetairos and Euelpides, both very tired. They are clambering down from the rocky heights towards the level stage. Pisthetairos

has a crow perched on his arm or shoulder, and Euelpides has a jackdaw. Both Pisthetairos and Euelpides are carrying packs on their back. They are followed by two slaves carrying more bags. The slaves stay well out of the way until they get involved in the action later on.

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

PISTHETAIROS

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

EUELPIDES

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

PISTHETAIROS

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

EUELPIDES

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

10

PISTHETAIROS [*looking around*]

I have no idea
where on earth we are.

EUELPIDES

You mean from here
you couldn't make it back to your place?

[10]

PISTHETAIROS:

No way—not even Execestides
could manage that.*

EUELPIDES

We're in a real mess.

PISTHETAIROS

Well, you could try going along that pathway.

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

EUELPIDES

We two were conned by that Philokrates,
the crazy vendor in the marketplace

who sells his birds on trays. He claimed these two
 would take us straight to Tereus the hoopoe,
 a man who years ago became a bird.
 That's why we paid an obol for this one,
 this jackdaw, son of Tharreleides.*
 and three more for the crow. And then what?
 The two know nothing, except how to bite.

20

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

What's got your attention now? In those rocks?

[20]

You want to take us there? There's no way through.

PISTHETAIROS *[calling across the stage to Euelpides]*

By god, the same thing over here, no road.

EUELPIDES

What's your crow saying about the pathway?

30

PISTHETAIROS

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

EUELPIDES *[shouting]*

But what's it saying about the road?

PISTHETAIROS

Nothing—

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

EUELPIDES *[addressing the audience]*

Don't you think it's really odd the two of us,
 ready and eager to head off for the birds,*
 just can't find the way. You see, we're not well.
 All you men sitting there to hear our words,

[30]

we're ill with a disease, not like the one
 which Sacas suffers,* no—the opposite.
 He's no true citizen, yet nonetheless
 he's pushing his way in by force, but we,
 both honoured members of our tribe and clan,*
 both citizens among you citizens,
 with no one trying to drive us from the city,
 have winged our way out of our native land
 on our two feet. We don't hate the city
 because we think it's not by nature great
 and truly prosperous—open to all,
 so they can spend their money paying fines.

40

50

Cicadas chirp up in the trees a while,

60

SERVANT-BIRD *[inside]*

Who is it? Who's shouting for my master?

[60]

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

EUELPIDES

My lord Apollo, save us! That gaping beak—

SERVANT-BIRD *[also frightened]*

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

EUELPIDES

Don't act so weird!

Can't you say something nice?

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

You two men will die!

EUELPIDES

But we're not men.

SERVANT-BIRD

What? What are you, then?

EUELPIDES

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

SERVANT-BIRD

That's rubbish.

EUELPIDES

No, it's not—I've just dropped my load—

80

down both my legs. Take a look.

SERVANT-BIRD

And this one here?

What kind of bird is he?

[to Pisthetairos]

Can you speak?

PISTHETAIROS

Me? . . . a crapper-fowl . . . from Phasis.

EUELPIDES

God knows what kind of animal you are!

SERVANT-BIRD

I'm a servant bird.

EUELPIDES

Beaten by some rooster

[70]

in a cock fight?

SERVANT-BIRD

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

EUELPIDES

Does a bird need his own butler bird?

90

SERVANT-BIRD

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

EUELPIDES

A runner bird—
that's what you are. Well, my little runner,
do you know what we'd like to have you do?

[80]

Go call your master for us.

SERVANT-BIRD

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

100

EUELPIDES

Wake him up anyway.

SERVANT-BIRD

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

[Exit Servant-Bird back through the doors]

PISTHETAIROS

Damn that bird—he scared me half to death.

EUELPIDES

Bloody hell—he frightened off my bird!

PISTHETAIROS

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

EUELPIDES

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

PISTHETAIROS

Not me, by god.

EUELPIDES

Where is it then?

PISTHETAIROS

It flew off on its own.

110 [90]

EUELPIDES

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

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

Throw open this wood, so I may issue forth.

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

EUELPIDES

O Hercules, what kind of beast is this?

What's that plumage? What sort of triple crest?

TEREUS

Who are the persons here who seek me out?

EUELPIDES

The twelve gods, it seems, have worked you over.*

TEREUS

Does seeing my feathers make you scoff at me?

Strangers, I was once upon a time a man.

EUELPIDES

It's not you we're laughing at.

TEREUS

Then what is it?

EUELPIDES

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

120

TEREUS

It's how Sophocles distorts Tereus—

[100]

that's me—in his tragedies.

EUELPIDES

You're Tereus?

Are you a peacock or a bird?*

TEREUS

I am a bird.

EUELPIDES

Then where are all your feathers?

TEREUS

They've fallen off.

EUELPIDES

Have you got some disease?

TEREUS

No, it's not that.

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

EUELPIDES

Us? We're human beings.

TEREUS

From what race were you born?

EUELPIDES

Our origin?

In Athens—which makes the finest warships.

130

TEREUS

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

EUELPIDES

No, no.

We're different—we keep away from juries.

TEREUS

Does that seedling flourish in those parts?

[110]

EUELPIDES

If you go searching in the countryside,
you'll find a few.

TEREUS

So why have you come here?

What do you need?

EUELPIDES

To talk to you.

TEREUS

What for?

EUELPIDES

Well, you were once a man, as we are now.
You owed people money, as we do now.
You loved to skip the debt, as we do now.
Then you changed your nature, became a bird.

140

You fly in circles over land and sea.
You've learned whatever's known to birds and men.
That's why we've come as suppliants to you,

[120]

to ask if you can tell us of some town,
where life is sheepskin soft, where we can sleep.

TEREUS

Are you looking for a mighty city,
more powerful than what Cranaus built?*

EUELPIDES

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

TEREUS

You clearly want an aristocracy. ¹⁵⁰

EUELPIDES

Me? No, not at all. The son of Scellias
is someone I detest.*

TEREUS

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

EUELPIDES

I'd like a city where my biggest problem
would be something like this—in the morning
a friend comes to my door and says to me,
“In the name of Olympian Zeus, take a bath,

[130]

an early one, you and your children,
then come to my place for the wedding feast
I'm putting on. Don't disappoint me now.

¹⁶⁰

If you do, then don't come looking for me
when my affairs get difficult for me.”*

TEREUS

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

PISTHETAIROS

I'd like the same.

TEREUS

Like what?

PISTHETAIROS

To have the father of some handsome lad
come up to me, as if I'd done him wrong,
and tell me off with some complaint like this—
“A fine thing there between you and my son,

[140]

you old spark. You met him coming back
from the gymnasium, after his bath—

¹⁷⁰

you didn't kiss or greet him with a hug,

or even try tickling his testicles—
yet you're a friend of mine, his father."

TEREUS

How you yearn for problems, you unhappy man.
There is a happy city by the sea,
the Red Sea, just like the one you mention.*

EUELPIDES

No, no. Not by the sea! That's not for us,
not where that ship Salamia can show up
with some man on board to serve a summons
early in the morning. What about Greece?

180

Can you tell us of some city there?*

TEREUS

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

EUELPIDES

In Leprous? By the gods,
I hate the place—although I've never seen it—
[150]
it's all Melanthius' fault.*

TEREUS

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

EUELPIDES

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

TEREUS

It's not unpleasant.

190

First of all, you have to live without a purse.

EUELPIDES

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

TEREUS

In the gardens we enjoy white sesame,
[160]
the myrtles, mint, and poppies.

EUELPIDES

So you live
just like newly-weds.

PISTHETAIROS

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

TEREUS

What do you want to get us all to do?

PISTHETAIROS

What should you be convinced to do? Well, first,
don't just fly about in all directions,
²⁰⁰
your beaks wide open—that makes you despised.
With us, you see, if you spoke of men
who always flit about and if you asked,
“Who's that Teleas” someone would respond,
“The man's a bird—he's unreliable,
flighty, vague, never stays in one place long.”*

[170]

TEREUS

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

PISTHETAIROS

Settle down together in one city.

TEREUS

What sort of city could we birds set up?

²¹⁰

PISTHETAIROS

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

TEREUS

All right.

PISTHETAIROS

Now look up.

TEREUS

I'm looking up.

PISTHETAIROS

Turn your head round to the side.

TEREUS

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

PISTHETAIROS

What do you see?

TEREUS

Clouds and sky.

PISTHETAIROS

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

TEREUS

A staging area? How come it's that?

PISTHETAIROS

You might say it's a location for them—

[180]

there's lots of business here, but everything
keeps moving through this zone, so it's now called
a staging place. But if you settled here,
fortified it, and fenced it off with walls,
this staging area could become your state.
Then you'd rule all men as if they're locusts
and annihilate the gods with famine,
just like in Melos.*

220

TEREUS

How'd we manage that?

PISTHETAIROS

Look, between earth and heaven there's the air.
Now, with us, when we want to go to Delphi,
we have to ask permission to pass through
from the Boeotians. You should do the same.

230

When men sacrifice, make gods pay you cash.

[190]

If not, you don't grant them rights of passage.
You'll stop the smell of roasting thigh bones
moving through an empty space and city
which don't belong to them.

TEREUS

Wow!!! Yippee!!

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

PISTHETAIROS

The other birds?

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

240

TEREUS

You can do it. I've taught them how to speak.

[200]

Before I came, they could only twitter,
but I've been with them here a long, long time.

PISTHETAIROS

How do you call to bring them all together?

TEREUS

Easy. I'll step inside my thicket here,
and wake my nightingale. Then we'll both call.
Once they hear our voices they'll come running.

PISTHETAIROS

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

250

*[Tereus goes back through the doors]**

TEREUS *[singing]*

Come my queen, don't sleep so long,
pour forth the sound of sacred song—

[210]

lament once more through lips divine
for Itys, your dead child and mine,
the one we've cried for all this time.*

Sing out your music's liquid trill
in that vibrato voice—the thrill
which echoes in those purest tones
through leafy haunts of yew trees roams
and rises up to Zeus' throne.

260

Apollo with the golden hair
sits listening to your music there—
and in response he plucks his string—
his lyre of ivory then brings
the gods themselves to dance and sing.

Then from gods' mouths in harmony

[220]

come sounds of sacred melody.

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

EUELPIDES

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

PISTHETAIROS

Hey!

EUELPIDES

What?

PISTHETAIROS

Shut up.

EUELPIDES

Why?

PISTHETAIROS

That hoopoe bird—

270

he's all set to sing another song.

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

Epo-popo-popo-popo-popoi,
Io, io, ito, ito, ito, ito.

Come here to me,
all you with feathers just like mine,

[230]

all you who live in country fields
fresh-ploughed, still full of seed,
and all you thousand tribes
who munch on barley corn
who gather up the grain,

280

and fly at such a speed
and utter your sweet cries,
all you who in the furrows there
twitter on the turned-up earth,
and sweetly sing
tio tio tio tio tio tio tio—

All those of you
who like to scavenge food
from garden ivy shoots,

[240]

all you in the hills up there

290

who eat from olive and arbutus trees.
come here as quickly as you can,
fly here in answer to this call—
trio-to trio-to toto-brix!

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

300

godwits and francolins—
I'm calling you.

You flocks who fly across the seas

[250]

across the waves with halcyons
 come here to learn the news.
 We're all assembling here,
 all tribes of long-neck birds.
 A shrewd old man's arrived—
 he's here with a new plan,
 a man of enterprise,

310

all set to improvise.
 So gather all of you
 to hear his words.

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

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

[260]

Toro-toro toro-toro li-li-lix

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

PISTHETAIROS

Seen any birds lately?

EUELPIDES

No, by Apollo, I haven't—
 even though I'm staring up into the sky,
 320
 not even blinking.

PISTHETAIROS

It seems to me
 that hoopoe bird was just wasting time
 hiding, like a curlew, in that thicket,
 and screaming out his bird calls—
[imitating Tereus] po-poi po-poi

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

BIRD *[offstage]*

Toro-tix, toro-tix.

PISTHETAIROS

Hey, my good man, here comes a bird.

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

EUELPIDES

By Zeus,
 that's a bird? What kind would you call that?

It couldn't be a peacock, could it?

[Tereus re-enters from the thicket]

PISTHETAIROS

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

330

TEREUS

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

[270]

EUELPIDES

My goodness, she's gorgeous—flaming red!

TEREUS

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

[A second bird enters, a Peacock]

EUELPIDES *[to Pisthetairos]*

Hey . . .

PISTHETAIROS

What is it?

EUELPIDES

Another bird's arrived.

PISTHETAIROS

You're right. By god, this one looks really odd.
[To Tereus] Who's this bizarre bird-prophet of the Muse,
this strutter from the hills?

TEREUS

He's called the Mede.

PISTHETAIROS

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

340

EUELPIDES

Here's another one . . .

[The next bird enters, another Hoopoe]

. . . what a crest of feathers!

PISTHETAIROS *[To Tereus]*

What's this marvel? You're not the only hoopoe?

[280]

This here's another one?

TEREUS

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

Hipponicus the son of Callias,
and Callias son of Hipponicus.*_—

PISTHETAIROS

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

TEREUS

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

350

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

PISTHETAIROS

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

TEREUS

This one's the Glutton-bird.

PISTHETAIROS

Another glutton?
Cleonymus is not the only one?*__—

EUELPIDES

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

PISTHETAIROS

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

TEREUS

No, my dear fellow, they live up on the crests,
because it's safer, like the Carians.*_—

360

PISTHETAIROS *[looking offstage]*

Holy Poseidon, do you see those birds!
What a fowl bunch of them—all flocking here!

EUELPIDES *[looking in the same direction]*

Lord Apollo, there's a huge bird cloud! Wow!
So many feathered wings in there I can't see
a way through all those feathers to the wings.

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

PISTHETAIROS

Hey, look at that—
it's a partridge, and that one over there,
by Zeus, a francolin—there's a widgeon—

and that's a halcyon!

EUELPIDES

What's the one behind her?

PISTHETAIROS

What is it? It's a spotted shaver.

EUELPIDES

Shaver?

³⁷⁰

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

PISTHETAIROS

Why not?

After all, there's that barber in the city—
the one we all call Sparrow Sporgilos.*

[³⁰⁰]

Here comes an owl.

EUELPIDES

Well, what about that?

Who brings owls to Athens?*

PISTHETAIROS [*identifying birds in the crowd*]

. . . a turtle dove,

a jay, lark, sedge bird . . .

EUELPIDES

. . . finch, pigeon . . .

PISTHETAIROS

. . . falcon,

hawk, ring dove . . .

EUELPIDES

. . . cuckoo, red shank . . .

PISTHETAIROS

. . . fire-crest . . .

EUELPIDES

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

PISTHETAIROS

. . . woodpecker!!

EUELPIDES

What a crowd of birds! A major flock of fowls!

³⁸⁰

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

PISTHETAIROS

It looks that way to me.

CHORUS LEADER [*starting with a bird call*]

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

[310]

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

TEREUS

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

CHORUS LEADER

Ti-tit-ti ti-tit-ti ti-ti-ti-ti

390

tell me as a friend what you have to say.

TEREUS

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

CHORUS LEADER [*interrupting*]

What? What are you saying?

TEREUS

I'm telling you two old men have arrived—

[320]

they've come from lands where human beings live
and bring the stalk of a stupendous plan.

CHORUS LEADER

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

400

TEREUS

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

CHORUS LEADER

What have you done to us?

TEREUS

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

CHORUS LEADER

You dared to do that?

TEREUS

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

CHORUS LEADER

These two men of yours,

are they among us now?

TEREUS

Yes, as surely as I am.

CHORUS [*breaking into a song of indignation*]

Aiiii, aiiii

He's cheated us,
he's done us wrong.
That friend of ours,

410

who all along
has fed with us
in fields we share,

[330]

now breaks old laws
and doesn't care.

We swore a pact
of all the birds.
He's now trapped us
with deceitful words—
so power goes

420

to all our foes,
that wicked race
which since its birth
was raised for war
with us on earth.

CHORUS LEADER

We'll have some words with that one later.
These two old men should get their punishment—
I think we should give it now. Let's do it—
rip 'em to pieces, bit by bit.

PISTHETAIROS

We're done for.

EUELPIDES

It's all your fault—getting us into this mess.

430

Why'd you bring me here?

PISTHETAIROS

I wanted you to come.

[340]

EUELPIDES

What? So I could weep myself to death?

PISTHETAIROS

Now, you're really talking nonsense—
how do you intend to weep, once these birds

poke out your eyes?

CHORUS [*advancing towards Pisthetairos and Euelpides*

On, on . . .

let's move in to attack,
and launch a bloody rush,
come in from front and back,
and break 'em in the crush—
with wings on every side

440

they'll have no place to hide.

These two will start to howl,
when my beak starts to eat
and makes 'em food for fowl.
There's no well-shaded peak,
no cloud or salt-grey sea

[350]

where they can flee from me.

CHORUS LEADER

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

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

EUELPIDES

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

450

PISTHETAIROS

Why aren't you staying put?

EUELPIDES

Here with you?

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

PISTHETAIROS

How do you intend to get away from them?

EUELPIDES

I haven't a clue.

PISTHETAIROS

Then I'll tell you how—

we have to stay right here and fight it out.

So put that cauldron down.

[*Pisthetairos takes the cauldron from Euelpides and sets it down on the ground in front of them*]

EUELPIDES

What good's a cauldron?

PISTHETAIROS

It'll keep the owls away from us.

EUELPIDES

What about the birds with claws?

PISTHETAIROS [*rummaging in the pack*]

Grab this spit—
stick it in the ground in front of you.

EUELPIDES

How do we protect our eyes?

[360]

PISTHETAIROS [*producing a couple of tin bowls*]

An upturned bowl.

460

Set this on your head.

EUELPIDES: [*putting the tin bowl upside down on his head and holding up the pot, with the spit stuck in the ground*]

That's brilliant!

What a grand stroke of warlike strategy!

In military matters you're the best—

already smarter than that Nikias*

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

Keep those beaks level—no holding back now!

Pull 'em, scratch 'em, hit 'em, rip their skins off!

Go smash that big pot first of all.

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

TEREUS

Hold on, you wickedest of animals!

Tell me this: Why do you want to kill these men,

470

to tear them both to bits? They've done no wrong.

Besides, they're my wife's relatives, her clansmen.

CHORUS LEADER

Why should we be more merciful to them

than we are to wolves? What other animals

are greater enemies of ours than them?

Have we got better targets for revenge?

[370]

TEREUS

Yes, by nature enemies—but what if

they've got good intentions? What if they've come

to teach you something really valuable?

CHORUS LEADER

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

TEREUS

But folks with fine minds find from foemen
 they can learn a lot. Caution saves us all.
 We don't learn that from friends. But enemies
 can force that truth upon us right away.
 That's why cities learn, not from their allies,
 but from enemies, how to build high walls,
 assemble fleets of warships—in that way,
 their knowledge saves their children, homes, and goods.
 490 [380]

CHORUS LEADER

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

PISTHETAIROS *[to Euelpides]*

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

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

TEREUS *[to the Chorus Leader]*

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

PISTHETAIROS

They're acting now more peacefully to us—
 so put that pot and bowl down on the ground.
 But we'd better hang onto the spit, our spear.
 We'll use it on patrol inside our camp

500

[390]

right by this cauldron here. Keep your eyes peeled—
 don't even think of flight.

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

EUELPIDES

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

PISTHETAIROS

In Kerameikos—

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

CHORUS LEADER

Fall back into the ranks you held before.

510

[400]

Bend over, and like well-armed soldier boys,
 put your spirit and your anger down.
 We'll look into who these two men may be,
 where they come from, what their intentions are.

[The Chorus of Birds breaks up and retreats]

Hey, Hoopoe bird, I'm calling you!

TEREUS

You called?

What would you like to hear?

CHORUS LEADER

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

TEREUS

These strangers are from Greece, font of wisdom.

CHORUS LEADER

What accident or words

[410]

now brings them to the birds?

520

TEREUS

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

CHORUS LEADER

What's that you just said?
 What plan is in their head?

TEREUS

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

CHORUS LEADER

He thinks it's good that he
 should stay and live with me?

530

Is he trusting in some plan
 to help his fellow man
 or thump his enemy?

[420]

TEREUS

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

CHORUS LEADER

Is he crazy in the head?

540

TEREUS

He is shrewder than I said.

CHORUS LEADER

A brilliant thinking box?

TEREUS

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

[430]

CHORUS LEADER

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

TEREUS [*to the two slaves*]

Take their suits of armour in the house—
hang the stuff up in the kitchen there,
550
beside the cooking stool—may it bring good luck!

[*turning to Pisthetairos*]

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

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

PISTHETAIROS

No. By Apollo, I won't do it—
not unless they swear a pact with me
just like one that monkey Panaitios,

[440]

who makes our knives, had his wife swear to him—
not to bite or pull my balls or poke me.

CHORUS LEADER

You mean up your . . .

PISTHETAIROS

No, not there. I mean the eyes.

CHORUS LEADER

Oh, I'll agree to *that*.

PISTHETAIROS

Then swear an oath on it.

560

CHORUS LEADER

I swear on this condition—that I get
all the judges' and spectators' votes and win.*
_

PISTHETAIROS

Oh, you'll win!

CHORUS LEADER

And if I break the oath
then let me win by just a single vote.
Listen all of you! The armed infantry
can now pick up their weapons and go home.
Keep an eye out for any bulletins
we put up on our notice boards.

[450]

CHORUS [*singing*]

Man's by nature's born to lie.
But state your case. Give it a try.

570

There's a chance you have observed
some useful things inside this bird,
some greater power I possess,
which my dull brain has never guessed.
So tell all here just what you see.
If there's a benefit to me,
we'll share in it communally.

CHORUS LEADER

Tell us the business that's brings you here.

[460]

Persuade us of your views. So speak right up.
No need to be afraid—we've made a pact—

580

we won't be the ones who break it first.

PISTHETAIROS [*aside to Euelpides*]

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

[*giving instructions to the two slaves*]

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

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

some water]

EUELPIDES [*whispering to Pisthetairos*]

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

PISTHETAIROS

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

590

*[Pisthetairos, with the wreath on his head, now turns to the birds
and begins his formal oration]*

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

CHORUS LEADER

Kings? Us? What of?

PISTHETAIROS

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

CHORUS LEADER

Before the Earth?

PISTHETAIROS

Yes, by Apollo.

CHORUS LEADER

Well, that's something I never knew before!

[470]

PISTHETAIROS

That's because you're naturally uninformed—

600

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

EUELPIDES

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

PISTHETAIROS

So if they were born
before the Earth, before the gods, well then,

610

as the eldest, don't they get the right to rule?

EUELPIDES

By Apollo, yes they do.

[addressing the audience]

So you out there,
look ahead and sprout yourselves a beak—
in good time Zeus will hand his sceptre back

[480]

to the birds who peck his sacred oaks.

PISTHETAIROS

Way back then it wasn't gods who ruled.
They didn't govern men. No. It was the birds.
There's lots of proof for this. I'll mention here
example number one—the fighting cock—
first lord and king of all those Persians,

620

well before the time of human kings—
those Dariuses and Megabazuses.
Because he was their king, the cock's still called
the Persian Bird.

EUELPIDES

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

PISTHETAIROS

He was so great,
so mighty and so strong, that even now,
thanks to his power then, when he sings out
his early morning song, all men leap up

630

to head for work—blacksmiths, potters, tanners,

[490]

men who deal in corn or supervise the baths,
or make our shields or fabricate our lyres—
they all lace on their shoes and set off in the dark.

EUELPIDES

I can vouch for that! I had some bad luck,
thanks to that cock—I lost my cloak to thieves,
a soft and warm one, too, of Phrygian wool.
I'd been invited to a festive do,
where some child was going to get his name,
right here in the city. I'd had some drinks—

640

and those drinks, well, they made me fall asleep.
Before the other guests began to eat,

that bird lets rip his cock-a-doodle-doo!
 I thought it was the early morning call.
 So I run off for Halimus*—but then,
 just outside the city walls, I get mugged,
 some coat thief hits me square across the back—
 he used a cudgel! When I fall down there,
 about to cry for help, he steals my cloak!

PISTHETAIROS

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

650

CHORUS LEADER

King of the Greeks!!

PISTHETAIROS

That's right.
 As king he was the first to show us how
 [500]
 to grovel on the ground before a kite.

EUELPIDES

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

PISTHETAIROS

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

660

the wheat and barley in their fields.

EUELPIDES

That's why
 if someone's cock is ploughing your wife's field,
 we call you “Cuckoo!”—you're being fooled!*

PISTHETAIROS

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

[510]

the king received.

EUELPIDES

Now, that I didn't know.
 I always get amazed in tragedies
 670
 when some king Priam comes on with a bird.

I guess it stands on guard there, keeping watch
to see what presents Lysicrates gets.*

PISTHETAIROS

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

EUELPIDES

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

PISTHETAIROS

So when someone makes a sacrifice

680

and then, in accordance with tradition,
puts the guts into god's hands, the birds
can seize those entrails well before Zeus can.
Back then no man would swear upon the gods—
they swore their oaths on birds. And even now,

[520]

our Lampon seals his promises "By Goose,"
when he intends to cheat.* In days gone by,
all men considered you like that—as great
and sacred beings. Now they all think of you
as slaves and fools and useless layabouts.

690

They throw stones at you, as if you're mad.
And every hunter in the temples there
sets up his traps—all those nooses, gins,
limed sticks and snares, fine mesh and hunting nets,
and cages, too. Then once they've got you trapped,
they sell you by the bunch. Those who come to buy
poke and prod your flesh. If you seem good to eat,

[530]

they don't simply roast you by yourself—no!
They grate on cheese, mix oil and silphium
with vinegar—and then whip up a sauce,

700

oily and sweet, which they pour on you hot,
as if you were a chunk of carrion meat.

CHORUS

This human speaks
of our great pain
our fathers' sins [540]
we mourn again—
born into rule,
they threw away

what they received,
their fathers' sway.

710

But now you've come—
fine stroke of fate—
to save our cause.
Here let me state
I'll trust myself
and all my chicks
to help promote
your politics.

CHORUS LEADER

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

720

PISTHETAIROS

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

EUELPIDES

O Kebriones and Porphyryon!
What a mighty place! How well fortified!*

PISTHETAIROS

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

740

And I'd advise you send another bird
as herald down to human beings to say
that since the birds from now on will be kings,
they have to offer sacrifice to them.
The offerings to the gods take second place.
Then each of the gods must be closely matched

with an appropriate bird. So if a man
is offering Athena holy sacrifice,
he must first give the Coot some barley corn.
If sacrificing sheep to god Poseidon,

750

let him bring toasted wheat grains to the Duck.
And anyone who's going to sacrifice
to Hercules must give the Cormorant
some honey cakes. A ram for Zeus the king?
Then first, because the Wren is king of birds,
ahead of Zeus himself, his sacrifice
requires the worshipper to execute
an uncastrated gnat.

EUELPIDES

I like that bit about
the slaughtered gnat. Now thunder on, great Zan.*

[570]

CHORUS LEADER

But how will humans think of us as gods

760

and not just jackdaws flying around on wings?

PISTHETAIROS

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

EUELPIDES

But what if Zeus
lets his thunder peal, then fires down on us
his lightning bolt—that's got wings as well.

PISTHETAIROS [*ignoring Euelpides*]

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

[580]

EUELPIDES

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

PISTHETAIROS

Then as a test,

the ravens can peck out their livestock's eyes,
the ones that pull the ploughs to work the land,
and other creatures, too. Let Apollo

780

make them better—he's the god of healing.
That's why he gets paid.

EUELPIDES

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

PISTHETAIROS

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

CHORUS LEADER

Tell me
what these good things are.

PISTHETAIROS

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

790 [590]

won't devour the figs. One troop of thrushes
will eradicate them one and all.

CHORUS LEADER

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

PISTHETAIROS

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

CHORUS LEADER

Why won't those captains come to grief?

PISTHETAIROS

They'll always ask the birds about the trip.

800

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

EUELPIDES

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

PISTHETAIROS

Birds can show men
the silver treasures of their ancestors,
buried in the ground so long ago.
For birds know where these are. Men always say,

[600]

“No one knows where my treasure lies, no one,
except perhaps some bird.”

EUELPIDES

I’ll sell my boat.

810

I’ll buy a spade and dig up tons of gold.

CHORUS LEADER

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

PISTHETAIROS

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

EUELPIDES

You’re right.

A man whose business isn’t very sound
is never medically well.

CHORUS LEADER

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

PISTHETAIROS

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

CHORUS LEADER

And where will those come from?

820

PISTHETAIROS

From the birds’ supply. You know the saying,
“Five human lifetimes lives the cawing crow.”* [_](#)

EUELPIDES

My word, these birds are much more qualified
[610]
to govern us than Zeus.

PISTHETAIROS

Far better qualified!
First, we don’t have to build them holy shrines,
made out of stone, or put up golden doors
to decorate their sanctuaries. They live
beneath the bushes and young growing trees.

As for the prouder birds, an olive grove
will be their temple. When we sacrifice,

830

no need to go to Ammon or to Delphi—
we'll just stand among arbutus trees

[620]

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

CHORUS LEADER

Old man, how much you've been transformed for me—
From my worst enemy into my friend,
my dearest friend. These strategies of yours—

840

I'll not abandon them, not willingly.

CHORUS

The words you've said make us rejoice—
and so we'll swear with just one voice
an oath that if you stand with me—

[630]

our thoughts and aims in unity—
honest, pious, just, sincere,
to go against the gods up there,
if we're both singing the same song
the gods won't have my sceptre long.

CHORUS LEADER

Whatever can be done with force alone

850

we're ready to take on—what requires brains
or thinking through, all that stuff's up to you.

PISTHETAIROS

That's right, by Zeus. No time for dozing now,

[640]

or entertaining doubts, like Nikias.*
No—let's get up and at it fast.

TEREUS

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

PISTHETAIROS

That's easy.

My name's Pisthetairos.

TEREUS

And this man here?

EUELPIDES

I'm Euelpides, from Crioia.

860

TEREUS

Welcome both of you!

PISTHETAIROS and EUELPIDES

Thanks very much.

TEREUS

Won't you come in?

PISTHETAIROS

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

TEREUS

Come on, then.

[Tereus enters his house]

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

But . . . it's strange . . .

Come back a minute.

[Tereus reappears at the door]

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

[650]

TEREUS

I don't see any problem there.

PISTHETAIROS

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

TEREUS

Don't be afraid.

870

We have a little root you nibble on—
and then you'll grow some wings.

PISTHETAIROS

All right then,
let's go. *[To the slaves]* Manodorus, Xanthias,
bring in our mattresses.

CHORUS LEADER *[to Tereus]*

Hold on a second—

I'm calling you.

TEREUS

Why are you calling me?

CHORUS LEADER

Take those two men in—give ‘em a good meal.
But bring your tuneful nightingale out here,
who with the Muses sings such charming songs—
leave her with us so we can play together.

[660]

PISTHETAIROS

Yes, by god—agree to their request.

880

Bring out your little birdie in the reeds.

EUELPIDES

For gods’ sake, bring her out, so we can see
this lovely nightingale of yours.

TEREUS

If that’s what you both want, it must be done.

[calling inside]

Come here, Procne. Our guests are calling you.

[Enter Procne from the house. She has a nightingale’s head and wings but the body of a young woman. She’s wearing gold jewellery]

PISTHETAIROS

Holy Zeus, that’s one gorgeous little bird!
What a tender chick!

EUELPIDES

How I’d love to help that birdie
spread her legs, if you catch my drift.

PISTHETAIROS

Look at that—
all the gold she’s wearing—just like a girl.

[670]

EUELPIDES

What I’d like to do right now is kiss her.

890

PISTHETAIROS

You idiot—look at that beak she’s got,
a pair of skewers.

EUELPIDES

All right, by god,
we’ll treat her like an egg—peel off the shell,
take it clean off her head, and then we’ll kiss her.

TEREUS

Let’s get inside.

PISTHETAIROS

You lead us in—good luck to all!

[Pisthetairos, Euelpides, Tereus, Xanthias, and Manodorus enter the house]

CHORUS *[singing to Procne]*

Ah, my tawny throated love,
of all the birds that fly above
you're dearest to my heart
your sweet melodious voice
in my song plays its part—

900

my lovely Nightingale,
you've come,

[680]

you've come.

And now you're here with me.

Pour forth your melody.

Pipe out the lovely sounds of spring,
a prelude to my rhythmic speech
in every melody you sing.

[Procne plays on the flute for a few moments as the Chorus Leader prepares to address the audience directly. He steps forward getting close to the spectators]

CHORUS LEADER

Come now, you men out there, who live such dark, sad
lives—

you're frail, just like a race of leaves—you're shaped from
clay,

you tribes of insubstantial shadows without wings,
you creatures of a day, unhappy mortal men,
you figures from a dream, now turn your minds to us,
the eternal, deathless, air-borne, ageless birds,
whose wisdom never dies, so you may hear from us
the truth about celestial things, about the birds—

[690]

how they sprang into being, how the gods arose,
how rivers, Chaos, and dark Erebus were formed*—
about all this you'll learn the truth. And so from me
tell Prodicus in future to depart.* At the start,

920

there was Chaos, and Night, and pitch-black Erebus,
and spacious Tartarus. There was no earth, no heaven,
no atmosphere. Then in the wide womb of Erebus,
that boundless space, black-winged Night, first creature
born,

made pregnant by the wind, once laid an egg. It hatched,
when seasons came around, and out of it sprang Love—
the source of all desire, on his back the glitter

of his golden wings, just like the swirling whirlwind.
 In broad Tartarus, Love had sex with murky Chaos.
 From them our race was born—our first glimpse of the
 light. ⁹³⁰

Before that there was no immortal race at all,
 not before Love mixed all things up. But once they'd
 bred ^[700]
 and blended in with one another, Heaven was born,
 Ocean and Earth—and all that clan of deathless gods.
 Thus, we're by far the oldest of all blessed ones,
 for we are born from Love. There's lots of proof for this.
 We fly around the place, assisting those in love—
 the handsome lads who swear they'll never bend for sex,
 but who, as their young charms come to an end, agree
 to let male lovers bugger them, thanks to the birds,

⁹⁴⁰
 our power as gifts—one man gives a porphyryon,
 another man a quail, a third one gives a goose,
 and yet another offers up a Persian Fowl.*
 All mortals' greatest benefits come from us birds.
 The first is this: we make the season known—springtime,
 winter, autumn—it's time to sow, as soon as Crane
 migrates to Lybia with all that noise. He tells

^[710]
 the master mariner to hang his rudder up
 and go to sleep awhile. He tells Orestes, too,
 to weave himself a winter cloak, so he won't freeze ⁹⁵⁰
 when he sets out again to rip off people's clothes.*
 Then after that the Kite appears, to let you know
 another season's here—it's time to shear the sheep.
 Then Swallow comes. Now you should sell your winter
 cloak

and get yourself a light one. So we're your Ammon,
 Delphi and Dodona—we're your Apollo, too.*
 See how, in all your business, you first look to birds—
 when you trade, buy goods, or when a man gets married.
 Whatever you think matters in a prophecy,
 you label that a bird—to you, Rumour's a

bird; ^[720]
 you say a sneeze or a chance meeting is a bird,
 a sound's a bird, a servant's a bird—and so's an ass.
 It's clear you look on us as your Apollo.

CHORUS

So you ought to make gods of your birds,
 your muses prophetic, whose words
 all year round you've got,
 unless it's too hot.
 Your questions will always be heard.

And we won't run away to a cloud
and sit there like Zeus, who's so proud—

970

we're ready to give,
hang out where you live,
and be there for you in the crowd.

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, to you, your children, and their children, too,

[730]

we'll grant wealth and health, good life, and happiness,
peace, youth, laughter, dances, festivals of song—
and birds' milk, too—so much, you'll find yourself worn out
with our fine gifts—yes, that's how rich you'll be.

CHORUS

Oh woodland Muse
Tio-tio-tio-tiotinx

980

my muse of varied artful song
on trees and from high mountain peaks

[740]

tio-tio-tio-tiotinx
to your notes I sing along
in my leafy ash tree seat.

tio-tio-tio-tiontinx

From my tawny throat I fling
my sacred melodies to Pan.
In holy dance I chant and sing
our mother from the mountain land.

990

Toto-toto-toto-toto-toto-totinx

Here Phrynichus would always sip

[750]

ambrosial nectar from our tone
to make sweet music of his own.
tio-tio-tio-tiotinx.

CHORUS LEADER

If there's someone out there in the audience
who'd like to spend his future life among the birds
enjoying himself, he should come to us. Here, you see,
whatever is considered shameful by your laws,
is all just fine among us birds. Consider this—

1000

if your tradition says one shouldn't beat one's dad,
up here with us it's all right if some young bird
goes at his father, hits him, cries, "You wanna fight?
Then put up your spur!" If out there among you all

[760]

there is, by chance, a tattooed slave who's run away,
we'll call him a spotted francolin. Or else,

if someone happens to be Phrygian, as pure
 as Spintharos, he'll be a Philemon-bred finch.
 If he's like Execestides, a Carian slave,
 let him act the Cuckoo—steal his kin from us—

1010

some group of citizens will claim him soon enough.
 And if the son of Peisias still has in mind
 betraying our city gates to worthless men,
 let him become his father's little partridge cock—
 for us there's nothing wrong with crafty partridge stock.

CHORUS

Tio-tio-tio-tio-tinx-
 That's how the swans

[770]

massed in a crowd
 with rustling wings
 once raised aloud

1020

Apollo's hymn.

Tio-tio-tio-tio-tinx
 They sat in rows
 on river banks
 where Hebros flows.
 Tio-tio-tio-tio-tinx

Their song then rose
 through cloud and air—
 it cast its spell
 on mottled tribes

1030

of wild beasts there—
 the silent sky
 calmed down the sea.
 Toto-toto-toto-toto-totinx.

Olympus rang—

[780]

amazement seized
 its lords and kings.
 Then Muses there
 and Graces, too,
 voiced their response—

1040

Olympus sang.
 Tio-tio-tio-tio-tiotinx.

CHORUS LEADER

There's nothing sweeter or better than growing wings.
 If any of you members of the audience
 had wings, well, if you were feeling bored or hungry

with these tragic choruses, you could fly away,
go home for dinner, and then, once you'd had enough,
fly back to us again. Or if, by any chance,
a Patrocleides sits out there among you all,

[790]

dying to shit, he wouldn't have to risk a fart

1050

in his own pants—he could fly off and let 'er rip,
take a deep breath, and fly back down again.
If it should be the case that one of you out there
is having an affair, and you observe her husband
sitting here, in seats reserved for Council men,
well, once again, you could fly off and fuck the wife,
then fly back from her place and take your seat once more.
Don't you see how having wings to fly beats everything?
Just look at Diitrephes—the only wings he had
were handles on his flasks of wine, but nonetheless,

1060

they chose him to lead a squad of cavalry,
then for a full command, so now, from being nobody,
he carries out our great affairs—he's now become

[800]

a tawny civic horse-cock.*

*[Enter Pisthetairos and Euelpides from Tereus' house. They now
have wings on and feathers on their heads instead of hair]*

PISTHETAIROS

Well, that's that. By Zeus,
I've never seen a more ridiculous sight!

EUELPIDES

What are you laughing at?

PISTHETAIROS

At your feathers.
Have you any idea what you look like—
what you most resemble with those feathers on?
A goose painted by some cheap artiste!

EUELPIDES

And you look like a blackbird—one whose hair
1070
has just been cut using a barber's bowl.

PISTHETAIROS

People will use us as metaphors—
as Aeschlyus would say, "We're shot by feathers
not from someone else but of our very own."

CHORUS LEADER

All right, then. What do we now need to do?

PISTHETAIROS

First, we have to name our city, something
fine and grand. Then after that we sacrifice
[810]
an offering to the gods.

EUELPIDES

That's my view, too.

CHORUS LEADER

So what name shall we give our city?

PISTHETAIROS

Well, do you want to use that mighty name
1080
from Lacedaimon—shall we call it Sparta?

EUELPIDES

By Hercules, would I use that name Sparta
for my city? No. I wouldn't even try
esparto grass to make my bed, not if
I could use cords of linen.*

PISTHETAIROS

All right then, what name
shall we provide?

CHORUS LEADER

Some name from around here—
to do with clouds, with high places full of air,
something really extra grand.

PISTHETAIROS

Well, then,
how do you like this: Cloudcuckooland?

CHORUS LEADER

Yes! That's good! You've come up with a name
1090 [820]
that's really wonderful—it's great!

EUELPIDES

Hang on,
is this Cloudcuckooland the very spot
where Theogenes keeps lots of money,
and Aeschines hides all his assets?*

PISTHETAIROS

It's even more than that—it's Phlegra Plain,
the place where gods beat up on all the giants
in a bragging match.*

EUELPIDES

This fine metropolis!
O what a glittering thing this city is!

Now who should be the city's guardian god?
Who gets to wear the sacred robes we weave?

1100

PISTHETAIROS

Why not let Athena do the guarding?

EUELPIDES

But how can we have a finely ordered state
where a female goddess stands there fully armed,

[830]

while Cleisthenes still fondles weaving shuttles.*_—

PISTHETAIROS

Well, who will hold our city's strong Storkade?

CHORUS LEADER

A bird among us of a Persian breed—
it's said to be the fiercest anywhere
of all the war god's chicks.

EUELPIDES

Some princely cocks?
They're just the gods to live among the rocks!

PISTHETAIROS *[to Euelpides]*

Come now, you must move up into the air,

1110

and help the ones who're building up the wall—
hoist rubble for 'em, strip and mix the mortar,
haul up the hod, and then fall off the

ladder.

[840]

Put guards in place, and keep all fires concealed.
Make your inspection rounds holding the bell.*_—
Go to sleep up there. Then send out heralds—
one to gods above, one down to men below.
And then come back from there to me.

EUELPIDES

And you?
You'll stay here? Well, to hell with you . . .

PISTHETAIROS

Hey, my friend,
you should go where I send you—without you

1120

none of that work I mentioned will get done.
We need a sacrifice to these new gods.
I'll call a priest to organize the show.

[Euelpides exits. Pisthetairos calls to the slaves through the doors of Tereus' house]

You, boy, pick up the basket, and you,
my lad, grab up the holy water.

[850]

[Pisthetairos enters the house. As the Chorus sings, the slaves emerge and prepare for the sacrifice. The Chorus is accompanied by a raven playing the pipes]

CHORUS

I think it's good and I agree,
 your notions here are fine with me,
 a great big march with dancing throngs
 and to the gods send holy songs,
 and then their benefits to keep

1130

we'll sacrifice a baby sheep—
 let go our cry, the Pythian shout,
 while Chaeris plays our chorus out.

[The Raven plays erratically on the pipe. Pisthetairos comes out of the house. He brings a priest with him who is leading a small scrawny goat for the sacrifice]

PISTHETAIROS *[to the Raven]*

Stop blowing all that noise! By Hercules,
 what's this? I've seen some strange things, heaven knows,

[860]

but never this—a raven with a pipe
 shoved up his nose. Come on, priest, work your spell,
 and sacrifice to these new gods as well.

PRIEST

I'll do it. But where's the basket-bearing boy?

[The slave appears with the basket]

Let us now pray to Hestia of the birds,*

1140

and to the Kite that watches o'er the hearth,
 to all Olympian birds and birdesses . . .

PISTHETAIROS *[to himself]*

O Hawk of Sunium, all hail to you,
 Lord of the Sea . . .

PRIEST

And to the Pythian Swan of Delos—
 let's pray to Leto, mother of the quail

[870]

to Artemis the Goldfinch . . .

PISTHETAIROS

Ha! No more goddess
 of Colaenis now, but goldfinch Artemis . . .

PRIEST

. . . to Sabazdios, Phrygian frigate bird,

to the great ostrich mother of the gods
 1150 and of all men . . .

PISTHETAIROS

. . . to Cybele, our ostrich queen,
 mother of Cleocritos* . . .

PRIEST

. . . may they give
 to all Cloudcuckooites security,
 good health, as well—and to the Chians, too.*

PISTHETAIROS

I do like that—the way those Chians
 [880]
 always get tacked on everywhere—

PRIEST

. . . to Hero birds, and to their chicks,
 to Porphyryons and Pelicans,
 both white and grey, to Raptor-birds and Pheasants,
 Peacocks and Warblers . . .

[The Priest starts to get carried away]

. . . Ospreys and Teals
 Herons and Gannets, Terns, small Tits, big Tits, and . . . 1160

PISTHETAIROS *[interrupting]*

Hold on, dammit—stop calling all these birds.
 You idiot! In what sort of sacrifice

[890]
 does one call for ospreys and for vultures?
 Don't you see—one kite could snatch this goat,
 then carry it away? Get out of here,
 you and your garlands, too. I'll do it myself—
 I'll offer up this beast all on my own.

[Pisthetairos pushes the Priest away. Exit Priest]

CHORUS

Now once again I have to sing
 a song to purify you all,
 a holy sacred melody.

1170

The Blessed Ones I have to call—
 but if you're in a mood to eat
 we just need one and not a score
 for here our sacrificial meat

[900]
 is horns and hair, and nothing more.

PISTHETAIROS

Let us pray while we make sacrifice

to our feathery gods . . . [*raises his eyes to sky and shuts his eyes*]

[*A poet suddenly bursts on the scene reciting his verses as he enters*]

POET [*reciting*]

O Muse, in your songs sing the renown
of Cloudcuckooland—this happy town . . .

PISTHETAIROS

Where'd this thing come from? Tell me—who are you?

1180

POET

Me? I'm a sweet tongued warbler of the words—
a nimble servant of the Muse, as Homer says.

[910]

PISTHETAIROS

You're a slave and wear your hair that long?

POET

No, but all poets of dramatic songs
are nimble servants of the Muse, as Homer says.

PISTHETAIROS

No doubt that's why your nimble cloak's so thin.
But, oh poet, why has thou come hither?

POET

I've been making up all sorts of splendid songs
to celebrate your fine Cloudcuckoolands—
dithyrambs and virgin songs and other tunes

1190

after the style of that Simonides.*

PISTHETAIROS

When did you compose these tunes? Some time ago?

[920]

POET

O long long ago—yes, I've been singing
the glory of this town for years.

PISTHETAIROS

Look here—

I've just been making sacrifice today—
the day our city gets its name. What's more,
it's only now, as with a new-born child,
I've given it that name.

POET

Ah yes, but Muses' words are swift indeed—
like twinkling hooves on rapid steeds.
So thou, oh father, first of Aetna's kings,

1200

whose name means lots of holy things,
 present me something from thy grace
 whate'er you wish, just nod your face.*

[930]

PISTHETAIROS

This fellow here is going to give us trouble—
 unless we can escape by giving something.

[Calling one of the slaves]

You there with the tunic and the jerkin on.
 Strip off the leather jerkin. Give it up
 to this master poet. Take this jerkin.
 You look as if you're really freezing cold.

POET

The darling Muse accepts the gift

1210

and not unwillingly—
 But now your wit should get a lift
 from Pindar's words which . . .

PISTHETAIROS

This fellow's never going to go away!

[940]

POET *[making up a quotation]*

"Out there amid nomadic Scythians,
 he wanders from the host in all his shame,
 he who has no woven garment shuttle-made—
 a jerkin on, but no tunic to his name."
 I speak so you can understand.

PISTHETAIROS

Yes, I get it—you want the tunic, too.

1220

[To the slave] Take it off. We must assist our poets.
 Take it and get out.

POET

I'm on my way—
 But as I go I'll still make songs like these
 in honour of your city—
 "O thou sitting on a golden throne,

[950]

sing to celebrate that shivering, quivering land.
 I walked its snow-swept fruitful plains . . ."

*[At this point Pisthetairos has had enough. He grabs the poet and
 throws him into the wings]*

POET *[as he exits]*

Aaaaiiii!

PISTHETAIROS [*calling after him*]

Well, by Zeus, at least you've now put behind
the cold, since you've got that little tunic on!
God knows, that's a problem I'd not thought about—

1230

he learned about our city here so fast.
[*resuming the sacrifice*] Come, boy, pick up the holy water
and walk around again. Let everyone
observe a sacred holy silence now . . .

[*Enter an Oracle Monger, quickly interrupting the ceremony. He is carrying a scroll*]

ORACLE MONGER

Don't sacrifice that goat!

PISTHETAIROS

What? Who are you?

ORACLE MONGER

Who am I? I'm an oracular interpreter.

PISTHETAIROS

To hell with you!
[960]

ORACLE MONGER

Now, now, my dear good man,
don't disparage things divine. You should know
there's an oracle of Bacis which speaks
of your Cloudeuckooland—it's pertinent.

1240

PISTHETAIROS

Then how come you didn't talk to me
about this prophecy some time before
I set my city here?

ORACLE MONGER

I could not do that—
powers divine held me in check.

PISTHETAIROS

Well, I guess
there's nothing wrong in listening to it now.

ORACLE MONGER [*unrolling the scroll and reading from it*]

"Once grey crows and wolves shall live together
in that space between Corinth and Sicyon . . ."

PISTHETAIROS

What my connection to Corinthians?

ORACLE MONGER

Its Bacis' cryptic way of saying "air."
[970]

“First sacrifice to Pandora a white-fleeced ram.
Whoever first comes to prophesy my words,
let him receive a brand new cloak and sandals.”

1250

PISTHETAIROS

Are sandals in there, too?

ORACLE MONGER [*showing the scroll*]

Consult the book.

“Give him the bowl, fill his hands full with offal . . .”

PISTHETAIROS

The entrails? Does it say that in there?

ORACLE MONGER

Consult the book. “Inspired youth,
if thou dost complete what here I do command,
thou shalt become an eagle in the clouds—if not,
if thou will not give them me, you’ll ne’er become

1260

an eagle, or a turtle dove, or woodpecker.”

PISTHETAIROS

That’s all in there, as well?

ORACLE MONGER

Consult the book.

[980]

PISTHETAIROS [*pulling out a sheet of paper from under his tunic*]

Your oracle is not at all like this one—
Apollo’s very words. I them wrote down.
“When an impostor comes without an invitation—
a cheating rogue—and pesters men at sacrifice,
so keen is he to taste the inner parts, well then,
he must be beaten hard between the ribs . . .”

ORACLE MONGER

I don’t think you’re reading that.

PISTHETAIROS

Consult the book.

“Do not spare him, even if he’s way up there,

1270

an eagle in the clouds, or if he’s Lampon
or great Diopeithes in the flesh.”*

ORACLE MONGER

That’s not in there, is it?

PISTHETAIROS

Consult the book.

Now, get out! To hell with you . . .

{Pisthetairos beats the Oracle Monger off stage, hitting him with the scroll}

ORACLE MONGER

Ooooh . . . poor me! *[Exit]*

[990]

PISTHETAIROS

Run off and do your soothsaying somewhere else!

*[Enter Meton, carrying various surveying instruments, and wearing soft leather buskin boots]**

METON

I have come here among you all . . .

PISTHETAIROS

Here's more trouble.

And what have you come here to do? Your scheme—
what's it look like? What do you have in mind?
Why hike up here in buskin?

METON

I intend
to measure out the air for you—dividing it
in surveyed lots.

1280

PISTHETAIROS

For heaven's sake,
who are you?

METON *[shocked]*

Who am I? I'm Meton—
famous throughout Greece and Colonus.*

PISTHETAIROS

What are these things you've got?

METON

Rods to measure air.
You see, the air is, in its totality,
shaped like a domed pot cover . . . Thus . . . and so,
from up above I'll lay my ruler . . . it bends . . . thus . . .
set my compass inside there . . . You see?

[1000]

PISTHETAIROS

I don't get it.

METON

With this straight ruler here
I measure this, so that your circle here
becomes a square—and right in the middle there
we have a market place, with straight highways

1290

proceeding to the centre, like a star,
 which, although circular, shines forth straight beams
 in all directions . . . Thus . . .

PISTHETAIROS

This man's a Thales*

Now, Meton . . .

METON

What?

PISTHETAIROS

You know I love you—

[1010]

so do as I say and head out of town.

METON

Am I in peril?

PISTHETAIROS

It's like in Sparta—

they're kicking strangers out—lots of trouble—
 plenty of beatings on the way through town.

1300

METON

You mean a revolution?

PISTHETAIROS

God no, not that.

METON

Then what?

PISTHETAIROS

They've reached a firm decision—

it was unanimous—to punch out every quack.

METON

I think I'd best be off.

PISTHETAIROS

You should, by god,

although you may not be in time—the blows
 are coming thick and fast . . .

[Pisthetairos starts hitting Meton]

METON *[running off]*

O dear me . . . I'm in a pickle.

[Exit Meton. Pisthetairos yells after him]

PISTHETAIROS

Didn't I say that some time ago?

Go somewhere else and do your measuring!

[1020]

*[Enter an Athenian Commissioner. He is carrying voting urns. He is dressed in an extravagantly official costume]**

COMMISSIONER

Where are your honorary governors?

PISTHETAIROS

Who is this man—a Sardanapallos?*

1310

COMMISSIONER

I have come here to Cloudcuckooland
as your Commissioner—I was picked by lot.

PISTHETAIROS

As Commissioner? Who sent you here?

COMMISSIONER

Some dreadful paper from that Teleas.*

PISTHETAIROS

How'd you like to receive your salary
and leave, without doing anything?

COMMISSIONER

By god,
that would be nice. I should be staying at home
for the assembly. I've been doing some work
on Pharnakes' behalf.*

PISTHETAIROS

Then take your fee
and go. Here's what you get . . . *[strikes him]*

COMMISSIONER

What was that?

1320

PISTHETAIROS

A motion on behalf of Pharnakes.

[1030]

[Pisthetairos strikes him again]

COMMISSIONER

I call on witnesses—he's hitting me—
He can't do that—I'm a Commissioner!

[Exit the Commissioner, on the run. Pisthetairos chases him]

PISTHETAIROS

Piss off! And take your voting urns with you!
Don't you find it weird? Already they've sent out
Commissioners to oversee the city,
before we've made the gods a sacrifice.

[Enter a Statute-Seller reading from a long scroll]

STATUTE SELLER

“If a resident of Cloudcuckooland
should wrong a citizen of Athens . . .”

PISTHETAIROS

Here come scrolls again—what’s the trouble now?

1330

STATUTE SELLER

I’m a statute seller—and I’ve come here
to sell you brand-new laws.

PISTHETAIROS

What laws?

STATUTE SELLER

Like this—

“Residents of Cloudcuckooland must use

[1040]

the same weights and measures and currency
as those in Olophyxia.”*

PISTHETAIROS [*kicking him in the bum*]

Soon enough

you’ll use them on your ass, you Fix-your-Holean!!

STATUTE SELLER

What’s up with you?

PISTHETAIROS

Take your laws and shove off!

Today I’ll give you laws you really feel!

[*Statute Seller runs off. The Commissioner enters from the other side, behind Pisthetairos*]

COMMISSIONER [*reading from a paper*]

“I summon Pisthetairos to appear in court
in April on a charge of official outrage . . .”

1340

PISTHETAIROS [*turning*]

Really? You again! Why are you still here?

[*Pisthetairos chases the Commissioner off again. The Statute Seller then re-appears on the other side, also reading from a paper*]

STATUTE SELLER

“If anyone chases off court officers
and won’t receive them as the law decrees . . .”

[1050]

PISTHETAIROS [*turning*]

This is getting really bad—you still here?

[*Pisthetairos chases off the Statute Seller. The Commissioner re-appears on the other side of the stage*]

COMMISSIONER

I'll ruin you! I'll take you to court—
ten thousand drachmas you'll . . .

PISTHETAIROS: *[turning and chasing the Commissioner off stage]*

And I'll throw out those voting urns of yours!

STATUTE SELLER *[reappearing]*

Have you any memory of those evenings
when you used to shit on public pillars
where our laws are carved?

1350

[The Statute Seller turns his back on Pisthetairos, lifts up his tunic, and farts at him]

PISTHETAIROS *[reacting to the smell]*

Oh god! Someone grab him.

[The slaves try to catch the Statute Seller but he runs off. Pisthetairos calls after him]

Not going to stick around?

[to slaves] Let's get out of here—and fast. Go inside.
We'll sacrifice the goat to the gods in there.

[Pisthetairos and the slaves to inside the house]

CHORUS

All mortal men commencing on this day
at every shrine will sacrifice to me,
from now on offering me the prayers they say,

[1060]

for I control them all and everything I see.
I watch the entire world, and I protect
the growing crops, for I have power to kill
the progeny of all the world's insects,

1360

whose all-devouring jaws would eat their fill
of what bursts out from seeds on ground below,
or fruit above for those who lodge in trees.
I kill the ones who, as the greatest foe,
in sweet-smelling gardens cause great injuries
All living beasts that bite and crawl
are killed—my wings destroy them all.

[1070]

CHORUS LEADER

This public notice has been proclaimed today:
the man who kills Diagoras the Melian
will receive one talent—and if one of you

1370

assassinates some tyrant long since dead and gone,
he, too, will get one talent. So now, the birds, as well,

wish to make the same announcement here. Any one
who kills Philocrates the Sparrowman will get
one talent—and if he brings him in alive,
he'll get four.* That man strings finches up together,
then sells 'em—a single obol gets you seven.
He injures thrushes by inflating them with air

[1080]

then puts them on display. And he stuff feathers
up the blackbird's nose. He captures pigeons, too,

1380

keeps them locked up, and forces them to work for him,
tied up as decoy birds, underneath his nets.
We wish to make this known to you. If anyone
is keeping birds in cages in your courtyards,
we tell you, "Let them go." If you don't obey,
you, in your turn, will be arrested by the birds,
tied up and forced to work as decoys where we live.

CHORUS

O happy tribes
of feathered birds—
we never need

1390

a winter cloak.

[1090]

In summer days
the sun's far rays
don't injure us.
I live at ease
among the leaves
in flowery fields.
In love with sun
cicadas sing
through noonday heat

1400

their sharp-toned song
divinely sweet.
In winter caves
and hollow spots
I play all day
with mountain nymphs.
In spring we eat
white myrtle buds,
our virgin treat,