

ARISTOPHANES BIRDS

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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In the following translation, the line numbers without brackets refer to the English text; the numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text. Footnotes and stage directions have been provided by the translator.

In this translation, possessives of words ending in *-s* are usually indicated in the common way (that is, by adding *'s* (e.g. *Zeus* and *Zeus's*). This convention adds a syllable to the spoken word (the sound *-iz*). Sometimes, for metrical reasons, this English text indicates such possession in an alternate manner, with a simple apostrophe. This form of the possessive does not add an extra syllable to the spoken name (e.g., *Orestes* and *Orestes'* are both three-syllable words; whereas, *Orestes's* has four syllables).

The translator would like to acknowledge the valuable help he received from the notes in Alan H. Sommerstein's edition of *Birds* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1987).

HISTORICAL NOTE

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
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.]

BIRDS

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. 10
I've worn them out because I'm following
what this jackdaw says.

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.¹

EUELPIDES
We're in a real mess.

¹*Execestides*: An Athenian descended from Carian slaves and therefore not entitled to be a citizen. The point here is that he must have been extremely skilful to get to Athens, given where he started, and even he couldn't navigate his way back to Athens in this terrain.

BIRDS

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 20
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, a son of Tharreleides,
and three more for the crow.¹ And then what?
The two know nothing, except how to bite.

[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.

¹ *Tereus*: the name of a mythological king of Thrace who married Procne and raped her sister Philomela. The sisters killed his son and fed Tereus the flesh for dinner. All three were changed into birds: Tereus into a hoopoe, Procne into a nightingale, and Philomela into a swallow. *Tharreleides*: the reference here seems to be to a well-known member of the audience, perhaps celebrated for his small size and loud voice.

BIRDS

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.¹ 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.² 40
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.³ 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. 50
Cicadas chirp up in the trees a while,
a month or two, but our Athenians [40]
keep chirping over lawsuits all their lives.
That's why right now we've set off on this trip,
with all this stuff—basket, pot, and myrtle boughs.⁴
We're looking for a nice relaxing spot,
where we can settle down, live out our lives.
We're heading for Tereus, that hoopoe bird—
we'd like to know if in his flying around
he's seen a city like the one we want. 60

PISTHETAIROS

Hey!

EUELPIDES

What?

PISTHETAIROS

My crow keeps cawing upwards—up there.

¹*birds*: the Greek expression is “to the Ravens,” meaning “go to hell.”

²*Sacas*: a name for Acestor, a foreign-born tragic dramatist.

³*tribe and clan*: the political units of Athenian civic life.

⁴*basket, pot, and myrtle boughs*: these materials were necessary to conduct the sacrifices at the founding of a new city.

BIRDS

EUELPIDES

My jackdaw's looking up there, too, [50]
as if it wants to show me something.
There must be birds around these rocks. I know—
let's make noise and then we'll see for sure.

PISTHETAIROS

You know what you should do? Kick that outcrop.

EUELPIDES

Why not use your head? There'd be twice the noise.

[Pisthetairos and Euelpides start climbing back up the rocky outcrops towards a door in the middle of the rocks]

PISTHETAIROS

Pick up a stone and then knock on the door.

EUELPIDES

All right. Here I go.

[Euelpides knocks very loudly on the door and calls out.]

Hey, boy . . . boy!

PISTHETAIROS

What are you saying? Why call the hoopoe "boy"? 70
Don't say that—you should call out
[giving a bird call]
"Hoopoe-ho."

EUELPIDES

Hoopoe-ho! . . . Should I knock again? . . . Hoopoe-ho!

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—

BIRDS

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

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—
down both my legs. Take a look.

80

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.

BIRDS

EUELPIDES

Beaten by some rooster
in a cock fight?

[70]

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?
Go call your master for us.

[80]

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.

BIRDS

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.¹

¹*twelve gods*: the major Olympian deities, headed by Zeus.

BIRDS

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—
that's me—in his tragedies.

[100]

EUELPIDES

You're Tereus?
Are you a peacock or a bird?¹

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.

¹Most Athenians knew very little about peacocks.

BIRDS

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

140

[120]

BIRDS

TEREUS

Are you looking for a mighty city,
more powerful than what Cranaus built?¹

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.²

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,
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.
If you do, then don't come looking for me
when my affairs get difficult for me.”³

[130]

160

TEREUS

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

PISTHETAIROS

I'd like the same.

¹*Cranaus*: reference to a mythological king who founded Athens or a word derived from *kranaos*, meaning rugged, a word often applied to Athens.

²*son of Scellias*: the reference is to a man called Aristocrates, an important politician-soldier in Athens.

³*difficult for me*: this is a utopian fantasy because the neighbour is suggesting that, as a punishment, his friend Euelpides would not have to help him if he gets in financial trouble, even though he's invited him to an important family celebration.

BIRDS

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.¹

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?²

TEREUS

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

EUELPIDES

In Lepreus? By the gods,
I hate the place—although I've never seen it— [150]
it's all Melanthius's fault.³

TEREUS

You could go

¹*Red Sea*: a general term for any sea by the southern coasts of Asia.

²*summons*: Athenian citizens could be legally summoned home for trial. Salamia was an official ship often used for such voyages.

³*Melanthius's fault*: the reference is to an Athenian tragic dramatist who had a very bad skin condition (making him look as if he had leprosy).

BIRDS

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

EUELPIDES

Be Opuntius—
no way, not for a talent's weight in gold.¹
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.”² [170]

¹*Opuntius*: a widely disliked Athenian informer. A talent's weight is just under 30 kilograms.

²*Teleas*: Athenian politician with a reputation for being unpredictable.

BIRDS

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?

BIRDS

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 220
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.¹

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.

¹Melos: the Athenians committed a horrible atrocity during the Peloponnesian War, starving the population of Melos and then executing all male citizens.

BIRDS

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.]¹

TEREUS *[singing]*

Come my queen, don't sleep so long,
pour forth the sound of sacred song—
lament once more through lips divine
for Itys, your dead child and mine,
the one we've cried for all this time.²

[210]

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's 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
come sounds of sacred melody.

[220]

¹In some productions of *The Birds* the set design permits the audience to see inside Tereus's quarters, so that the singer of the songs which follow remains visible to the audience. Alternatively, Tereus could move out onto a rocky balcony to deliver his song. It seems dramatically very weak to have him deliver these lyrics out of sight of the audience.

²*Itys*: son of Tereus and Procne, killed by his mother, who served him up as dinner, in revenge for Tereus's rape and mutilation of her sister.

BIRDS

[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,
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,
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.

[230]

280

BIRDS

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?

BIRDS

EUELPIDES

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

320

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's 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.

BIRDS

[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.
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?¹

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?
This here's another one?

[280]

TEREUS

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

¹The term Mede refers here to someone from Persia.

BIRDS

Hipponicus the son of Callias,
and Callias son of Hipponicus.¹

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, 350
and female creatures flock around him, too,
to yank his plumage out.

[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?²

PISTHETAIROS

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

¹*Hipponicus*: this passage refers to the Greek custom of naming children after their grandfathers. Philocles was a tragic dramatist. Callias, his son, was a notorious spendthrift who squandered his family inheritance on a debauched lifestyle.

²*Cleonymus*: an Athenian politician well known for his eating habits and his size. He also reputedly once threw his shield away in battle and ran off.

BIRDS

TEREUS

No, my dear fellow, they live up on the crests,
because it's safer, like the Carians.¹

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

370

PISTHETAIROS

Why not?
After all, there's that barber in the city—
the one we all call Sparrow Sporgilos.²
Here comes an owl.

[300]

¹*safer*: Pisthetairos refers to a race in which the runners wore helmets with plumes (crests), but Tereus misunderstands and talks about mountain crests where the birds live. Caria is in Asia Minor.

²*shaver*: the Greek bird *kerulos* was a mythological species. The passage here plays on the similarity of the verb *keirein* meaning *to cut hair*.

BIRDS

EUELPIDES

Well, what about that?
Who brings owls to Athens?¹

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

... porphyron, 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!
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!

380

PISTHETAIROS

It looks that way to me.

CHORUS LEADER [*starting with a bird call*]

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

[310]

¹*Athens*: to bring owls to Athens is an expression for something totally unnecessary (like bringing coals to Newcastle).

BIRDS

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
tell me as a friend what you have to say.

390

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

[320]

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?

BIRDS

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*]

Aiii, aiiii

He's cheated us,
he's done us wrong.
That friend of ours,
who all along
has fed with us
in fields we share,
now breaks old laws
and doesn't care.

410

[330]

We swore a pact
of all the birds.
He's now trapped us
with deceitful words—
so power goes
to all our foes,
that wicked race
which since its birth
was raised for war
with us on earth.

420

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.

BIRDS

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?

BIRDS

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 two tin bowls]*

An upturned bowl.
Set this on your head.

460

[Euelpides puts the tin bowl upside down on his head and holding up the pot, with the spit stuck in the ground.]

EUELPIDES

That's brilliant!
What a grand stroke of warlike strategy!

BIRDS

In military matters you're the best—
already smarter than that Nikias.¹

[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,
to tear them both to bits? They've done no wrong.
Besides, they're my wife's relatives, her clansmen.

470

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,
or tell us something useful—they're enemies,
our feathered forefathers' fierce foes.

480

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

¹*Nikias*: Athenian general famous for his tactical skill.

BIRDS

I'll tell the generals we died in battle,
fighting with the troops at Orneai.¹

CHORUS LEADER

Fall back into the ranks you held before.
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.

510 [400]

[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
now brings them to the birds?

[410]
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.

¹*Orneai*: a siege in which some Athenians took part. There were no casualties.

BIRDS

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.

BIRDS

[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.¹

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]*

By nature man is 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,

¹win: a reference to the fact that *The Birds* is competing in a drama festival.

BIRDS

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 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

BIRDS

goes back before old Kronos and the Titans,
way back before even Earth herself!¹

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 610
before the Earth, before the gods, well then,
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.

¹*Earth*: Kronos was the father of Zeus; the Titans were the sons of Kronos. Earth was the original mother goddess.

BIRDS

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,
men who deal in corn or supervise the baths, [490]
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—

BIRDS

he used a cudgel!¹ 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
to grovel on the ground before a kite.

[500]

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.²

PISTHETAIROS

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

660

EUELPIDES

That's why
if someone's cock is ploughing your wife's field,
we call you “Cuckoo!”—you're being fooled!³

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.

¹*Halimus*: a community on the coast near Athens.

²*kite*: an old Greek custom of saluting the kite as the bird announcing the arrival of spring by rolling on the ground. This speech refers to the habit of carrying small coins in the mouth. Having eaten his money, he can't buy the food he set out to purchase.

³These lines are an attempt to deal with a totally obscure sexual pun in the Greek.

BIRDS

And it got its own share of all the gifts
the king received. [510]

EUELPIDES

Now, that I didn't know.
I always get amazed in tragedies
when some king Priam comes on with a bird. 670
I guess it stands on guard there, keeping watch
to see what presents Lysicrates gets.¹

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
and then, in accordance with tradition, 680
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.² 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]

¹*Lysicrates gets*: a reference to a corrupt Athenian politician.

²*Lampon*: a well known soothsayer in Athens. "By Goose" is a euphemistic way of swearing "By Zeus."

BIRDS

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.¹

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 720
unless by using every scheme there is
we get back what's ours—our sovereignty.

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.

¹*Silphium*: a plant (also known as laserwort) used in ancient times as, among other things, a seasoning in cooking.

BIRDS

EUELPIDES

O Kebriones and Porphyrion!
What a mighty place! How well fortified!¹

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.²
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.³ [570]

¹*Kebriones* and *Porphyrion* were two Giants who fought against the Olympian gods.

²These women all had sexual encounters with gods. Alkmene and Zeus produced Hercules; Semele and Zeus produced Dionysus; and Alope and Poseidon produced Hippothoon.

³*Zan*: an archaic and contemptuous name for Zeus.

BIRDS

CHORUS LEADER

But how will humans think of us as gods
and not just jackdaws flying around on wings? 760

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 people 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] 770

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
make them better—he's the god of healing.
That's why he gets paid. 780

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,

BIRDS

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

EUELPIDES

I'll sell my boat.
I'll buy a spade and dig up tons of gold.

810

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.”¹

EUELPIDES

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

[610]

PISTHETAIROS

Far better qualified!

¹crow: in legend and folk lore the life span of the crow was enormous.

BIRDS

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.¹
No—let's get up and at it fast.

TEREUS

But first, you must come in this nest of mine,

¹*Nikias*: Athenian general, famous for his hesitation about tactics.

BIRDS

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.

BIRDS

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

87o

PISTHETAIROS

All right then,
let's go. Manodorus and 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 them 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.

[66o]

PISTHETAIROS

Yes, by god—agree to their request.
Bring out your little birdie in the reeds.

88o

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.

BIRDS

[Enter Procne from the house. She has a nightingale's head and wings but the body of a young woman. She is 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.

BIRDS

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, 910
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.¹ And so from me
tell Prodicus in future to depart.² 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.
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,

¹*Erebus*: the primeval darkness.

²*Prodicus*: a reference to a well-known philosopher who offered a materialistic explanation for the origin of the gods.

BIRDS

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 porphyryion,
another man a quail, a third one gives a goose,
and yet another offers up a Persian Fowl.¹
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.²
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.³
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.

¹These lines refer to the custom of giving one's lover a bird as a present.

²*Orestes*: the reference is to a well-known thief of other people's clothing.

³In other words, we're all the oracles you need. Ammon, Delphi, and Dodona are shrines famous for prophecy. Apollo is the god of prophecy.

BIRDS

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

O 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-tiotinx
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

BIRDS

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]

BIRDS

dying to shit, he wouldn't have to risk a fart
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,
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
a tawny civic horse-cock.¹

1050
1060
[800]

[Enter Pisthetairos and Euelpides from Tereus's 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
has just been cut using a barber's bowl.

1070

PISTHETAIROS

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

¹*Diitrephes*: prominent Athenian politician and general. A horse-cock is a mythological animal with the front of a horse and the rear of a cock.

BIRDS

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
an offering to the gods. [810]

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
from Lacedaemon—shall we call it Sparta? 1080

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.¹

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
that's really wonderful—it's great! 1090 [820]

¹Poor people used esparto grass to make rope chords to hold up the mattress. Rich folks used linen. The pun here is obviously on Sparta/esparto. Euelpides won't have anything to do with Sparta or anything that sounds like it.

BIRDS

EUELPIDES

Hang on.

Is this Cloudcuckooland the very spot
where Theogenes keeps lots of money,
and Aeschines hides all his assets?¹

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.²

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,
while Cleisthenes still fondles weaving shuttles.³

[830]

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!

¹*Theogenes and Aeschines*: two Athenian business men who constantly boasted they were richer than they were.

²The *Giants* were the monstrous children of Uranus; the gods are the Olympians, headed by Zeus. The point here is that Cloudcuckooland is so great, it's a place for divine boasting, not just the sort of thing rich Athenians might brag about.

³*Cleisthenes*: a well-known homosexual in Athens, often satirized by Aristophanes.

BIRDS

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.¹
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's 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.]

¹The officer inspecting the sentries regularly rang a small bell to indicate that all was well.

BIRDS

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 . . .¹

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 . . .²

PRIEST

. . . may they give

¹*Hestia*: traditional goddess of the hearth.

²*Cleocritus*: a very ugly Athenian who was often compared to an ostrich.

BIRDS

to all Cloudcuckooites security,
good health, as well—and to the Chians, too.¹

PISTHETAIROS

I do like that—the way those Chians [880]
always get included 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
Hérons 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 . . .

¹The *Chians* were staunch allies of Athens in the Peloponnesian War.

BIRDS

[Pisthetairos 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, O 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.¹

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,

¹*Simonides*: well-known lyric poet of the previous generation.

BIRDS

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, O father, first of Aetna's kings,
whose name means lots of holy things,
present me something from thy grace
whate'er you wish, just nod your face.¹

1200

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

1210

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

¹These lines are a jumble of allusions to well-known poems. The founder of Aetna is Heiron, ruler of Syracuse, whose name is the same as the word for "of holy things." In Homer a nod of the head signifies divine assent.

BIRDS

[To the slave]

Take it off. We must assist our poets.

[To the poet]

Take this and get out.

POET

I'm on my way—
But as I go I'll still make songs like these
in honour of your splendid city—
"O thou sitting on a golden throne,
sing to celebrate that shivering, quivering land.
I walked its snow-swept fruitful plains . . ."

[950]

[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 now you've put behind
the cold, since you've got that little tunic on!
God knows, that's a problem I'd not thought about—
he learned about our city here so fast.

1230

[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.

BIRDS

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 Cloudcuckooland—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's my connection to Corinthians?

ORACLE MONGER

Its Bacis' cryptic way of saying "air."
"First sacrifice to Pandora a white-fleeced ram.
Whoever first comes to prophesy my words,
let him receive a brand new cloak and sandals."

[970]
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 says that in there?

BIRDS

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

1260

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,
an eagle in the clouds, or if he’s Lampon
or great Diopeithes in the flesh.”¹

1270

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!

[990]

¹*Lampon and Diopeithes* were well-known soothsayers in Athens.

BIRDS

[The Oracle Monger runs off.]

PISTHETAIROS

Run off and do your soothsaying somewhere else!

[Enter Meton, carrying various surveying instruments, and wearing soft leather buskin boots]¹

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.²

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]

¹Meton was a famous astronomer and engineer.

²Colonus: a district of Athens.

BIRDS

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

PISTHETAIROS

This man's a Thales!¹
Now, Meton . . .

METON

What?

PISTHETAIROS

You know I love you—
so do as I say and head out of town. [1010]

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?

¹*Thales*: very famous astronomer and thinker from distant past. Thales is often considered the founder of philosophy.

BIRDS

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

Did I not 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.]¹

COMMISSIONER

Where are your honorary governors?

PISTHETAIROS

Who is this man—a Sardanapallos?²

1310

COMMISSIONER

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

PISTHETAIROS

As Commissioner? Who sent you here?

¹*Commissioner*: an official who was sent out to supervise and report on a new colony.

²*Sardanapallos* was the last king of Assyria, famous in legend for his extravagant lifestyle and appearance.

BIRDS

COMMISSIONER

Some dreadful paper from that Teleas.¹

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.²

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.]

¹Teleas, an Athenian politician, would have proposed sending the Commissioner out.

²Pharnakes was an important Persian official. Dealing with him would be considered treasonous in some quarters.

BIRDS

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
the same weights and measures and currency
as those in Olophyxia.”¹

[1040]

PISTHETAIROS [*kicking him in the rear*]

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?

¹A small town in the remote north east of Greece (by Mount Athos).

BIRDS

[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’m taking 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]*

O 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.]

BIRDS

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. Anyone
who kills Philocrates the Sparrowman will get
one talent—and if he brings him in alive,
he'll get four.¹ 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

¹At the drama festival formal public announcements like this were part of the script. Diagoras was a notorious atheist who had fled Athens. The reward for killing old tyrants was part of a ritual pronouncement to protect democracy.

BIRDS

of feathered birds—
we never need
a winter cloak. 1390 [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,
in garden places 1410
of the Graces. [1100]

CHORUS LEADER

We want to speak to all the judges here
about our victory—the splendid things
we'll give them if their verdict goes our way—
how they'll get much lovelier gifts than those
which Alexander got.¹ And first of all,
what every judge is really keen to have,
some owls of Laureium who'll never leave.²
They'll nest inside your homes, hatch in your purse,
and always breed small silver change. And then, 1420
as well as this, you'll live in temple-homes.
The birds will make your roof tops eagle-style, [1110]
with pediments.³ If you hold some office,
a minor post, and wish to get rich quick,
we'll set a sharp-beaked falcon in your hands.

¹*Alexander*: another name for Paris of Troy.

²The owls of Laureium are coins. The owl was stamped on Athenian coins, and Laureium was the site of the silver mines.

³Greek temples commonly had triangular pediments known as “eagles.”

BIRDS

And if you need to eat, then we'll dispatch
a bird's crop, where it keep its stored-up food.
If you don't vote for us, you should prepare
some little metal plates to guard your head.
You'll need to wear them, just like statues do. 1430
For those of you without that head plate on,
when you dress up in fine white brand-new clothes,
the birds will crap on as a punishment.

[Enter Pisthetairos from the house.]

PISTHETAIROS

You birds, we've made a splendid sacrifice.
But why is there still no messenger
arriving from the walls to bring us news 1120
of what's going on up there? Ah, here comes one,
panting as if he'd run across that stream
at Elis where Olympian athletes race.

[Enter First Messenger, out of breath.]

FIRST MESSENGER

Where is . . . Where is he . . . where . . . where is . . .
where . . . where . . . our governor Pisthetairos? 1440

PISTHETAIROS

I'm here.

FIRST MESSENGER

The building of your wall . . . it's done.

PISTHETAIROS

That's great news.

FIRST MESSENGER

The result—the best there is . . .
the most magnificent . . . so wide across . . .
that Proxenides of Braggadocio
and Theogenes could drive two chariots
in opposite directions past each other
along the top, with giant horses yoked,
bigger than that wooden horse at Troy.

BIRDS

PISTHETAIROS [*genuinely surprised*]
By Hercules!

FIRST MESSENGER

I measured it myself—
its height—around six hundred feet. 1450 [1130]

PISTHETAIROS

Wow!
By Poseidon, that's some height! Who built the wall
as high as that?

FIRST MESSENGER

The birds—nobody else.
No Egyptian bore the bricks—no mason,
no carpenter was there. They worked by hand—
I was amazed. Thirty thousand cranes flew in
from Lybia—they brought foundation stones
they'd swallowed down. The corn crakes chipped away
to form the proper shapes. Ten thousand storks
brought bricks. Lapwings and other river birds
fetched water up into the air from down below. 1460 [1140]

PISTHETAIROS

Who hauled the mortar up there for them?

FIRST MESSENGER

Hérons—
they carried hods.

PISTHETAIROS

How'd they load those hods?

FIRST MESSENGER

My dear man, that was the cleverest thing of all.
Geese shoved their feet into the muck and slid them,
just like shovels, then flicked it in the hods.

PISTHETAIROS

Is there anything we can't do with our feet?

FIRST MESSENGER

Then, by god, the ducks, with slings attached
around their waists, set up the bricks. Behind them

BIRDS

flew the swallows, like young apprentice boys,
with trowels—they carried mortar in their mouths.

1470 [1150]

PISTHETAIROS

Why should we hire wage labour anymore?
Go on—who finished off the woodwork on the wall?

FIRST MESSENGER

The most skilled craftsmen-birds of all of them—
woodpeckers. They pecked away to make the gates—
the noise those peckers made—an arsenal!
Now the whole thing has gates. They're bolted shut
and guarded on all sides. Sentries make rounds,
patrolling with their bells, and everywhere
troops are in position, with signal fires
on every tower. But I must go now—
I need to wash. You'll have to do the rest.

1480 [1160]

[Exit First Messenger.]

CHORUS LEADER

What's up with you? Aren't you astonished
to hear the wall's been finished up so fast?

PISTHETAIROS

Yes, by gods, I am. It is amazing!
To me it sounds just like some made-up lie.
But here comes a guard from there—he'll bring news
to us down here of what's going on up top.
He face looks like a dancing warrior's.

[Enter the Second Messenger in a great panic and out of breath.]

SECOND MESSENGER

Hey . . . hey . . . Help . . . hey you . . . help!

1490 [1170]

PISTHETAIROS

What's going on?

SECOND MESSENGER

We suffered something really bad . . .
one of the gods from Zeus has just got through,
flown past the gates into the air, slipping by
the jackdaw sentinels on daytime watch.

BIRDS

PISTHETAIROS

That's bad! A bold and dangerous action.
Which god was it?

SECOND MESSENGER

We're not sure. He had wings—
we do know that.

PISTHETAIROS

You should have sent patrols
of frontier guards out after him without delay.

SECOND MESSENGER

We did dispatch the mounted archers—
thirty thousand falcons, all moving out
with talons curved and ready—kestrels, buzzards,
vultures, eagles, owls—the air vibrating
with the beat and rustle of their wings,
as they search out that god. He's not far off—
in fact, he's here somewhere already.

1500 [1180]

[Exit Second Messenger.]

PISTHETAIROS

We'll have to get our sling-shots out—and bows.
All you orderlies come here! Fire away!
Strike out! Someone fetch a sling for me!

[Xanthias and Manodorus enter with slings and bows. The group huddles together with weapons ready.]

CHORUS *[in grand epic style]*

And now the combat starts, a strife beyond all words,
me and the gods at war. Let everyone beware,
protect the cloud-enclosing air, which Erebus
gave birth to long ago. Make sure no god slips through
without our catching sight of him. Maintain your watch
on every side—already I can hear close by
the sound of beating wings from some god in the sky.

1510 [1190]

[Enter Iris, in long billowing dress and with a pair of wings. She descends from above, suspended by a cable and hovering in mid-air flapping her wings.]

BIRDS

PISTHETAIROS

Hey, you—just where do you think you're flying?
Keep still. Stay where you are. Don't move. Stop running.
Who are you? Where you from? You've got to tell me.
Where'd you come from?

[1200]

IRIS

I'm from the Olympian gods.

PISTHETAIROS

You got a name? You look like a ship up there—
the Salaminia or the Paralos.¹

1520

IRIS

I'm fast Iris.

PISTHETAIROS

Fast as in a boat or fast as in a bitch?

IRIS

What is all this?

PISTHETAIROS

Is there a buzzard here
who'll fly up there to arrest this woman?

IRIS

Arrest me? Why are you saying such rubbish?

PISTHETAIROS

You're going to be very sorry about this.

IRIS

This whole affair is most unusual.

PISTHETAIROS

Listen, you silly old fool, what gates
did you pass through to breach the wall?

¹Pisthetairus compares Iris to a ship because her dressing is billowing like a sail. The two names he gives are the two main flag ships of the Athenian fleet.

BIRDS

IRIS

What gates?

By god, I don't have the least idea.

1530 [1210]

PISTHETAIROS

Listen to her—how she feigns ignorance!

Did you go past the jackdaw generals?

You won't answer that? Well then, where's your pass,
the one the storks give out?

IRIS

What's wrong with you?

PISTHETAIROS

You don't have one, do you?

IRIS

Have you lost your wits?

PISTHETAIROS

Didn't some captain of the birds up there
stick a pass on you?

IRIS

By god no, no one up there
made a pass or shoved his stick at me, you wretch.

PISTHETAIROS

So you just fly in here, without a word,
going through empty space and through a city
which don't belong to you?

1540

IRIS

What other route
are gods supposed to fly?

PISTHETAIROS

I've no idea.

But, by god, not this way. It's not legal.

Right now you're in breach of law. Do you know,
of all the Irises there are around,
if you got what you most deserve, you'd be
the one most justly seized and sent to die.

[1220]

BIRDS

IRIS

But I'm immortal.

PISTHETAIROS

In spite of that,
you would have died. For it's obvious to me
that we'd be suffering the greatest injury,
if, while we rule all other things, you gods
do just what you like and won't recognize
how you must, in your turn, attend upon
those more powerful than you. So tell me,
where are you sailing on those wings of yours?

1550

IRIS

Me? I'm flying to men from father Zeus,
instructing them to sacrifice some sheep
to the Olympian gods on sacred hearths—
and fill their streets with smells of offerings.

[1230]

PISTHETAIROS

Who are you talking about? Which gods?

1560

IRIS

Which gods? Why us of course—the gods in heaven.

PISTHETAIROS

And you're the gods?

IRIS

Are there any other deities?

PISTHETAIROS

The birds are now men's gods—and to the birds
men must now sacrifice and not, by god, to Zeus.

IRIS *[in the grand tragic style]*

Thou fool, thou fool, stir not the awesome minds of gods,
lest Justice with the mighty mattock of great Zeus
destroy your race completely—and smoke-filled flames
from Licymnian lightning bolts burn into ash
your body and your home . . .

[1240]

PISTHETAIROS *[interrupting]*

Listen, woman—stop your spluttering.

BIRDS

Just keep still. Do you think you're scaring off 1570
some Lydian or Phrygian with such threats?
You should know this—if Zeus keeps on annoying me,
I'll burn his home and halls of Amphion,
reduce them all to ash with fire eagles.
I'll send more than six hundred birds—porphyriions
all dressed in leopard skins, up there to heaven, [1250]
to war on him. Once a single porphyrion
caused him distress enough.¹ And as for you,
if you keep trying to piss me off, well then,
I'll deal with Zeus's servant Iris first— 1580
I'll fuck your knickers off—you'd be surprised
how hard an old man's prick like mine can be—
it's strong enough to ram your hull three times.

IRIS

Blast you, you wretch, and your obscenities!

PISTHETAIROS

Go way! Get a move on! Shoo!

[Iris begins to move up and away.]

IRIS

My father
won't stand for insolence like this—he'll stop you!

PISTHETAIROS

Just go away, you silly fool! Fly off [1210]
and burn someone to ashes somewhere else.

[Exit Iris.]

CHORUS

On Zeus's family of gods we've shut our door—
they'll not be passing through my city any more. 1590
Nor will men down below in future time invoke
the gods by sending them their sacrificial smoke.

PISTHETAIROS

Something's wrong. That messenger we sent,

¹*Porphyrion* was the name of one of the giants who went to war against Zeus.

BIRDS

the one that went to human beings, what if
he never gets back here again? [1270]

[Enter First Herald, a bird, carrying a golden crown.]

FIRST HERALD

O Pisthetairos, you blessed one,
wisest and most celebrated of all men . . .
the cleverest and happiest . . . trebly blest . . .
Speak something to me . . .

PISTHETAIROS

What are you saying?

FIRST HERALD

All people, in honour of your wisdom, 1600
crown you with this golden diadem.

PISTHETAIROS *[putting on the crown]*

I accept.
But why do people honour me so much?

FIRST HERALD

O you founder of this most famous town,
this city in the sky, do you not know
how much respect you have among all men,
how many men there are who love this place?
Before you built your city in the air, [1280]
all men were mad for Sparta—with long hair,
they went around half starved and never washed,
like Socrates—and carrying knobbed sticks. 1610
But now they've all completely changed—these days
they're crazy for the birds. For sheer delight
they imitate the birds in everything.
Early in the day when they've just got up,
like us, they all flock to feed together,
but on their laws, browsing legal leaflets,
nibbling their fill of all decrees. So mad
have they become for birds that many men [1290]
have had the names of birds assigned to them.
One lame tradesman now is called the Partridge. 1620
And Melanippus' name is changed to Swallow,

BIRDS

Opuntius the Raven with One Eye.¹
Philocles becomes the Lark, and Sheldrake
is now Teagenes's name. Lycurgus
has become the Ibis, Chaerephon the Bat,
Syracosius the Jay, and Meidias
is now named the Quail—he looks like one
right after the quail flicker's tapped its head.²
They're so in love with birds they all sing songs [1300]
with lines about a swallow or a duck, 1630
or goose, some kind of pigeon, or just wings,
even about some tiny bits of feather.
That's what's going on down there. I tell you,
more than ten thousand men are coming here,
demanding wings and talons in their lives.
You've got to find a way to get some wings
for your new colonists and immigrants.

[Exit First Herald.]

PISTHETAIROS

All right, by god, this is no time for us
to just stand around. You, get inside there—
fill all the crates and baskets up with feathers. 1640 [1310]
Get on with it as fast as possible.
Let Manes haul the wings out here to me.³
I'll welcome those who come from down below.

[Xanthias and Manodoros go inside the house and start bringing out baskets of feathers.]

CHORUS

Our city soon will have a reputation
for a large and swelling population.

PISTHETAIROS

Just let our luck hold out!

CHORUS

Our city here inspires so much love . . .

¹The lines following refer to a number of political figures in Athens.

²This reference is to a very popular betting game in which a quail was placed inside a circle and tapped on the head to see if it would back off or stand its ground.

³Manes is probably another name for Manodoros, since there are only two slaves in the play.

BIRDS

PISTHETAIROS *[to Manodoros, who is bringing out a basket]*
I'm telling you you've got to bring it fast!

CHORUS

For what do we not have here up above
which any men require in their places? 1650
Desire, Wisdom, and eternal Graces—
we've got them all and what is still the best—
the happy face of gentle peaceful Rest.

PISTHETAIROS *[to Manes]*

God, you're a lazy slave—move it! Faster!

CHORUS

Let him bring the wings in baskets on the go—
then once more run at him—give him a blow.
The lad is like a donkey—he's that slow.

PISTHETAIROS

Yes, that Manes is a useless slave.

CHORUS

Now first of all you need to sort
these wings all out for each cohort— 1660 [1330]
musical wings and wings of seers,
wings for the sea. You must be clear—
you need to look at all such things
when you give every man his wings.

[Manes comes out with a basket, again moving very slowly.]

PISTHETAIROS

By the kestrels, I can't stop grabbing you—
when I see how miserably slow you are.

[Manes twists loose and runs back into the house. A young man enters singing.]

YOUNG MAN *[singing]*

Oh, I wish I could an eagle be
soaring high above the barren sea,
the grey-blue ocean swell so free.

BIRDS

PISTHETAIROS

It looks like our messenger told us the truth—
here comes someone singing that eagle-song.

1670

YOUNG MAN

Damn it—there's nothing in the world as sweet
as flying . . .

<PISTHETAIROS

You've come to get some wings from us, I'd guess.>¹

YOUNG MAN

Yes, I'm in love with all your birdy ways—
I want to live with you and fly. Besides,
I think your laws are really keen.

PISTHETAIROS

What laws? The birds have many laws.

YOUNG MAN

All of them—but I really like that one
which says it's all right for a younger bird
to beat up his old man and strangle him.

1680

PISTHETAIROS

Yes, by god, we think it very manly
when a bird, while still a chick, beats up his dad.

[1350]

YOUNG MAN

That's why I want to re-locate up here—
I'd love to choke my father, get all his stuff.

PISTHETAIROS

But there's an ancient law among the birds—
inscribed in stone on tablets of the storks,
“When father stork has raised up all his young,
when they are set to fly out of the nest,
then young storks must, in their turn, care for him.”

¹I follow Sommerstein's useful suggestion and add this line here to make sense of the lines which follow.

BIRDS

YOUNG MAN

So coming here has been no use, by god, 1690
if I've now got to feed my father, too.

PISTHETAIROS

No, no. My dear young man, since you came here [1360]
in all good faith, I'll fix you up with wings
just like an orphan bird.¹ And I'll give you
some fresh advice—something I learned myself
when I was just a lad. Don't thump your dad.

[Pisthetairos starts dressing the boy as a bird as he says the following lines.]

Take this wing here, and in your other hand
hold this spur tight. Think of this crest on top
as from a fighting cock. Then stand your guard,
go on a march, live on a soldier's pay— 1700
and let your father live. You like to fight,
so fly away to territories in Thrace,
and do your fighting there.

YOUNG MAN

By Dionysus,
I think the advice you give is good. [1370]
I'll do just what you say.

PISTHETAIROS

And now, by Zeus,
you're talking sense.

[Exit Young Man. Enter Cinesias, singing and dancing very badly.]²

CINESIAS *[singing]*

To Olympus on high
with my wings I will fly—
With this song I will soar
and then sing a few more . . . 1710

¹At the festival for tragic drama, the war orphans were paraded around in special armour given to them by the state.

²*Cinesias* was a well-known and frequently satirized poet in Athens. He was extremely thin and evidently suffered very badly from diarrhea.

BIRDS

PISTHETAIROS

This creature needs a whole pile of wings!

CINESIAS [*singing*]

For my body and mind
know not fear, so I'll find . . .

PISTHETAIROS

Cinesias, welcome. Let me now greet
a man as thin as bark on linden trees!
Why have you come whirling here on such lame feet?

CINESIAS [*singing*]

A bird—that's what I long to be, [1380]
a clear-voice nightingale—that's me.

PISTHETAIROS

Stop singing—just tell me what you want to say.

CINESIAS

I want you to give me wings, then float up, 1720
flying high into the clouds where I can pluck
wind-whirling preludes swept with snow.

PISTHETAIROS

You want to get your preludes from the clouds?

CINESIAS

But all our skill depends upon the clouds.
Our brilliant dithyrambs are made of air—
of mist and gleaming murk and wispy wings.
You'll soon see that—once you've heard a few. [1390]

PISTHETAIROS

No, no—I won't.

CINESIAS

Yes, by Hercules, you will.
For you I'll run through all the airs . . .

[*starts singing*]

O you images of birds, 1730
who extend your wings,

BIRDS

who tread upon the air,
you long-necked birds . . .

PISTHETAIROS [*trying to interrupt*]
All right. Enough!

CINESIAS [*ignoring Pisthetairos, continuing to sing another song*]
Soaring upward as I roam.
I wander floating on the breeze . . .

PISTHETAIROS [*looking in one of the baskets of wings*]
By heaven, I'll stop these blasting winds of yours!

[*Pisthetairos takes a pair of wings and starts poking Cinesias around the stage with them, tickling him.*]

CINESIAS [*dodging away from Pisthetairos and continuing to sing*]
First I head along the highway going down south,
but then my body turns towards the windy north,
as I slice airy furrows where no harbour lies . . .

1740 [1400]

[*Cinesias has to stop singing because Pisthetairos is tickling him too much with the wings. He stops running off and singing. He's somewhat out of breath.*]

Old man, that's a clever trick—pleasant, too—
but really clever.

PISTHETAIROS
You mean you don't enjoy
being whisked with wings?

CINESIAS
Is that the way you treat
the man who trains the cyclic choruses—
the one whom tribes of men still fight to have?¹

PISTHETAIROS
Would you like to stick around this place
to train a chorus here for Leotrophides,²
made up of flying birds—the swallow tribe?

¹The tribes were the political divisions in Athenian life. The dithyrambic competitions were organized by tribes, each one wanting the services of the best poets.

²*Leotrophides* was another Athenian famous for being extremely thin (like Cinesias).

BIRDS

CINESIAS

You're making fun of me—that's obvious.
But I won't stop here until I get some wings
and I can run through all the airs.

1750

[Exit Cinesias. Enter a Sycophant, singing to himself.]

SYCOPHANT *[singing]*

Who are these birds with mottled wing?
They don't appear to own a thing—
O dappled swallow with extended wing . . .

[1410]

PISTHETAIROS

This is no minor problem we've stirred up—
here comes one more person singing to himself.

SYCOPHANT *[singing]*

O long and dappled wings, I call once more . . .

PISTHETAIROS

It seems to me his song's about his cloak—
he needs a lot of swallows to bring in the spring.¹

SYCOPHANT

Where's the man who's handing out the wings
to all who travel here?

1760

PISTHETAIROS

He's standing here.
But you should tell me what you need.

SYCOPHANT

Wings, wings.
I need wings. Don't ask me that again.

[1420]

PISTHETAIROS

Do you intend to fly off right away,
heading for Pellene?

SYCOPHANT

No, not at all.

¹The point here seems to be that the Sycophant's cloak is so thin and worn that he's singing for warm weather, when he won't need it.

BIRDS

I'm a summons server for the islands—
an informer, too . . .

PISTHETAIROS

 You're a lucky man
to have such a fine profession.

SYCOPHANT

 . . . and I hunt around
to dig up law suits. That's why I need wings,
to roam around delivering summonses
in allied states.

1770

PISTHETAIROS

 If you're equipped with wings,
will that make you more skilled in serving men?

SYCOPHANT

No. But I'd escape being hurt by pirates.
And then I could return home with the cranes,
once I've swallowed many law suits down
to serve as ballast.¹

PISTHETAIROS

 Is that what you do for work?
Tell me this—you're a strong young lad and yet
don't you slander strangers for a living?

[1430]

SYCOPHANT

What can I do? I never learned to dig.

PISTHETAIROS

But, by god, there are other decent jobs,
where a young man like you can earn his way,
more honest trades than launching still more law suits.

1780

SYCOPHANT

My good man, don't keep lecturing me like this.
Give me some wings.

¹Cranes reputedly swallowed stones to serve as ballast on their flights.

BIRDS

PISTHETAIROS

I'm giving you some wings—
I'm doing it as I talk to you right now.

SYCOPHANT

How can you put wings on men with words?

PISTHETAIROS

With words all men can give themselves their wings.

SYCOPHANT

All men?

PISTHETAIROS

Have you never heard in barber shops
how fathers always talk of their young sons— [1440]
"It's dreadful the way that Diitrephes' speech 1790
has given my young lad ambitious wings,
so now he wants to race his chariot."
Another says "That boy of mine has wings
and flutters over tragedies."

SYCOPHANT

So with words
they're really given wings?

PISTHETAIROS

That what I said.
With words our minds are raised—a man can soar.
That's how I want to give you wings—with words,
with useful words, so you can change your life
and get a lawful occupation.

SYCOPHANT

But I don't want to. [1450]

PISTHETAIROS

What will you do?

SYCOPHANT

I'll not disgrace my folks. 1800
Informing—that's my family's profession.
So give me now some light, fast falcon's wings—
or kestrel's—then I can serve my papers

BIRDS

on those foreigners, lay the charges here,
and fly back there again.

PISTHETAIROS

Ah, I get it—
what you're saying is that the case is judged
before the stranger gets here.

SYCOPHANT

That's right.
You understand exactly what I do.

PISTHETAIROS

And then, while he's travelling here by ship,
you fly out there to seize his property.

1810

SYCOPHANT

You've said it all. I've got to whip around
just like a whirling top.

[1460]

PISTHETAIROS

I understand—
a whirling top. Well, here, by god, I've got
the finest wings. They're from Corcyra . . . here!

[Pisthetairos produces a whip from the basket and begins hitting the Sycophant, who dodges around to evade the blows.]

SYCOPHANT

Ouch! That's a whip you've got!

PISTHETAIROS

No—a pair of wings.
With them I'll make you spin around all day!

SYCOPHANT

Ow! Help! That hurts!

PISTHETAIROS

Wing your way from here!
Get lost—I want rid of you, you rascal!
I'll show you legal tricks and twists—sharp ones, too!

BIRDS

[Pisthetairos beats the Sycophant off stage. Enter Xanthias and Manodorus from the house.]

Let's gather up these wings and go inside. 1820

[Pisthetairos and the two slaves carry the baskets of wings back into the house.]

CHORUS:

When we fly [1470]
we often spy
strange amazing spots—
in those flights
peculiar sights.

There's a tree grows far from us
simply called Cleonymos,
a useless tree, without a heart—
immense, and vile in every part.
It always blooms in early spring, 1830
bursting forth with everything
that launches legal quarrelling.
and then in winter time it yields [1480]
a shedding foliage of shields.

There's a land
ringed by the dark,
a gloomy wilderness,
where Heroes meet
and with men eat.

Men live with heroes in that place, 1840
except at dusk—then it's not safe
for the two of them to meet.
Men who in the night time greet [1490]
the great Orestes are stripped bare
he strikes at them and leaves them there.
And so without their clothes they bide—
paralysed on their right side.¹

[Enter Prometheus, muffling his face in a long scarf and holding an open umbrella.]

¹These lines refer to the notion that meeting up with ghosts of heroes is all right during the day but harmful at night. There is also another reference here to the thief Orestes (mentioned earlier by the Chorus Leader) who beats people and steals their clothes.

BIRDS

PROMETHEUS

Oh, dear, dear, dear. I pray Zeus doesn't see me.
Where's Pisthetairos?

[Pisthetairos enters from the house carrying a chamber pot. He is surprised to see the new arrival.]

PISTHETAIROS

Who's this? Why so muffled?

PROMETHEUS

Do you see any god who's trailed me here?

1850

PISTHETAIROS

No, by Zeus, I don't. But who are you?

PROMETHEUS

What time of day is it?

PISTHETAIROS

What time of day?

A little after noon. But who are you?

PROMETHEUS

Quitting time or later?

[1500]

PISTHETAIROS

You're pissing me off . . .

PROMETHEUS

What's Zeus up to? What about the clouds—
is he scattering them—or bringing them together?

PISTHETAIROS

You're a total fool!

PROMETHEUS

All right—then I'll unwrap.

[Prometheus takes off the muffler concealing his face.]

PISTHETAIROS

Prometheus, my friend!

BIRDS

PROMETHEUS

Hey, quiet. Don't shout.

PISTHETAIROS

What's the matter?

PROMETHEUS

Shhh . . . don't shout my name.

I'm done for if Zeus can see I'm here.

1860

But I'll tell you what's going on up there,

if you take this umbrella. Hold it up,

above our heads—that way no god can see.

PISTHETAIROS

Ah ha! Now that's a smart precaution—

[1510]

that's forethought, just like Prometheus!

Come under here—make it fast—all right, now,

you can talk without a worry.

[Pisthetairos and Prometheus huddle together under the umbrella.]

PROMETHEUS

Then listen.

PISTHETAIROS

I'm listening—speak up.

PROMETHEUS

Zeus is done for.

PISTHETAIROS

And when was he done in?

PROMETHEUS

It happened

once you colonized the air. From that point on,

1870

no human being has made a sacrifice

to any god, not once—and since that time

no savoury smells from roasting thigh bones

have risen up to us from down below.

So now, without our offerings, we must fast,

BIRDS

as if it's time for Thesmophoria.¹
The barbarian gods are starving—so now [1520]
they scream out like Illyrians and say
their armies will march down attacking Zeus,
unless he moves to get the ports re-opened, 1880
to make sliced entrails once again available.

PISTHETAIROS

You mean other gods, barbarian ones,
are there above you?

PROMETHEUS

Barbarian deities? Of course.
That's where Execestides derives
all his ancestral family gods.

PISTHETAIROS

What's the name of these barbarian gods?

PROMETHEUS

The name? They're called Triballians.²

PISTHETAIROS

I see—that must be where we get our phrase
a god's got me "by the balls." [1530]

PROMETHEUS

You got that right.
Now let me tell you something to the point— 1890
ambassadors are coming here to settle this,
from Zeus and those Triballians up there.
But don't agree to peace unless great Zeus
gives back his sceptre to the birds again,
and gives the Princess to you as your wife.

PISTHETAIROS

Whose this Princess?

¹*Thesmophoria*: an important religious festival in Greece, during which there was a period of fasting.

²*Triballians*: the name of a barbarian tribe in Thrace, north of Greece. The Tiballian god who enters with Poseidon and Hercules a few lines later on cannot speak Greek, so his lines are incomprehensible gibberish.

BIRDS

PROMETHEUS

The loveliest of girls—
she's the one in charge of Zeus's thunderbolt
and all his assets—wise advice, good laws,
sound common sense, dockyards, slanderous talk—
his paymistress who hands three obols out
to jury men . . .

[1540]
1900

PISTHETAIROS

So in Zeus's name,
she's the one in charge of everything?

PROMETHEUS

That's right.
If you get her from Zeus, you've got it all.
That's why I came here to tell you this.
I've always been a friend of human beings.

PISTHETAIROS

Yes, of all the gods it's thanks to you
that we can fry up fish.¹

PROMETHEUS

I hate all gods—
but you know that.

PISTHETAIROS

You've always hated them.
Heaven knows—it's something natural to you.

PROMETHEUS

I'm Timon through and through.² Time to get back.
So let me have the parasol. That way,
if Zeus does catch sight of me from there,
he'll think I'm following some basket girl.

1910

PISTHETAIROS

Take the piss pot, too—then you can act
as if you're the one who's carrying the stool.

¹*Prometheus* stole fire from heaven and gave it to human beings.

²*Timon* was a legendary Athenian who hated his fellow citizens.

BIRDS

[Prometheus leaves with the umbrella and the pot. Pisthetairos goes back into the house.]

CHORUS

By that tribe of men with such huge feet
they use them for a shade retreat,
there's stands a lake where Socrates,
deceives men's souls, that unwashed tease.

Peisander went there to find out
the spirit his life had been without.

1920

A big young camel he did slay,
then, like Odysseus, snuck away.

[1560]

By camel's blood to that place drawn,
up pops a Bat—it's Chaerephon!¹

[Enter Poseidon, Hercules, and the Triballian god.]

POSEIDON

Here it is—Cloudcuckooland—in plain view,
city we've come to as ambassadors.

[Poseidon inspects the clothing on the Triballian god.]

What are you doing? Why drape your cloak that way,
from right to left? It's got to be re-slung
the other way—like this.

[The Triballian tries to reshape his cloak but gets in a mess.]

You fumbling idiot—
a born Laespodias, that's what you are!²
O democracy! Where are you taking us,
when gods vote in a clumsy oaf like this?

1930

[1570]

[Poseidon continues to fuss over the Triballian's appearance.]

Keep your hands still! Oh, to hell with you!
You're the most uncivilized of all the gods
I've ever seen. All right, Hercules,
what do we do?

¹*Peisander*: an Athenian with a reputation for corruption and cowardice. Chaerephon was well known as an associate of Socrates.

²*Laespodias*: Athenian politician who dressed oddly to conceal his misshapen legs.

BIRDS

HERCULES

You've heard what I propose.
I'd like to wring his neck—whoever he is
who set up this blockade against the gods.

POSEIDON

But you forget, my friend, that we've been sent
as envoys to negotiate down here. 1940

HERCULES

That just makes me want to throttle him
twice as much as I wanted to before.

[The wall of the house now moves off to reveal Pisthetairos and the slaves getting dinner ready. They are preparing birds to cook in the oven.]

PISTHETAIROS

The grater for the cheese—can someone get it?
And bring the silphium. Hand me the cheese.
Now, fire up the coals. [1580]

POSEIDON

Greetings, mortal.
We three are gods, and we salute you!

PISTHETAIROS

But I'm grating silphium right now.

HERCULES

What kind of meat is this?

PISTHETAIROS

The meat's from birds—
they've been tried and sentenced for rebellion,
rising up against the fowl democracy. 1950

HERCULES

Is that why you're shredding silphium
all over them before doing something else?

PISTHETAIROS *[looking up and recognizing Hercules]*

Well, hello there, Hercules. What's up?

BIRDS

POSEIDON

We've come as envoys sent down from the gods
to negotiate the terms for peace.

PISTHETAIROS [*to one of the slaves*]

There's no oil left in the jug.

HERCULES

And bird meat
should be glistening with lots of oil. [1590]

POSEIDON

We gods get no advantage from this war.
If you and yours were friendly to the gods, 1960
you'd have water from the rain in all your ponds—
halcyon days would be here all the time.
We've come with total powers in such things.

PISTHETAIROS

From the start we didn't launch a war on you—
and we're ready to talk peace, if that's your wish,
provided you're prepared to do what's right.
And here's what's right: Zeus gives his sceptre back
to us—I mean the birds—once more. And then,
if we can settle this on these conditions,
I'll invite the envoys to have lunch with me. 1970

HERCULES [*salivating over the prepared bird*]

That's just fine with me! I vote we say . . .

POSEIDON [*interrupting*]

What's that you fool! Idiotic glutton!
You want give away your father's power? [1600]

PISTHETAIROS

Is that what you think? Look, if birds here
rule everything down there, won't you gods above
be even stronger? Now underneath the clouds
men can bend down and swear false oaths to you.
But once the birds and you become allies, [1610]
if any man should swear by Raven and by Zeus
and then perjure himself, Raven would come by, 1980
swoop down upon the man before he sees him,
peck at his eye and pluck it out.

BIRDS

POSEIDON

By Poseidon,
what you're saying makes good sense!

HERCULES

Sounds good to me.

PISTHETAIROS [*to the Triballian god*]

What do you say?

TRIBALLIAN [*speaking foreign gibberish*]

Nab aist roo.

PISTHETAIROS

You hear what he said? He agrees with you.
Now listen up—here's yet another benefit
you'll get from us. If any man once vows
to one of the gods he'll sacrifice a beast,
then tries to talk his way out of doing it
by splitting hairs and, acting on his greed,
holds back his vow, saying "Gods are patient,"
we'll make him pay for that as well.

1990

[1620]

POSEIDON

How?
Tell us how you'd do that.

PISTHETAIROS

Well, at some point,
when that man is counting up his wealth
or sitting in his bath, some kite will fly down,
while he's not paying attention, grab his cash,
the value of two sheep, and carry that
up to the god.

HERCULES

He gets my vote again—
I say we give the sceptre back to them.

POSEIDON

All right—ask the Triballian.

2000

BIRDS

HERCULES [*threateningly*]

Hey, you—
Triballian—want me to smack you round?

TRIBALLIAN [*afraid*]

Oo smacka skeen dat steek?

HERCULES

He says it's fine—
he agrees with me.

POSEIDON

Well, if it's what you want,
then it's all right with me.

[1630]

HERCULES [*to Pisthetairos*]

Hey, we're ready to agree to terms
about the sceptre.

PISTHETAIROS

By god, there's one more thing—
I've just remembered. I'll let Zeus keep Hera,
but he must give me that young girl Princess.
She's to be my wife.

POSEIDON

Then you don't want
a real negotiation. Come on, let's go back home.

PISTHETAIROS

That's up to you. Hey, cook, watch that gravy.
Make sure you make it sweet!

2010

HERCULES

Hey, Poseidon,
my dear fellow, where you going? Come on,
are we going to war about a woman?

POSEIDON

What should we do?

HERCULES

Do? Settle this matter.

BIRDS

POSEIDON

What? You fool! Don't you see what he's doing,
how all this time he's been deceiving you?
You're ruining yourself, you know. If Zeus dies,
after giving all his sovereignty to birds,
you'll have nothing. Right now you're his heir—
you get whatever's left when Zeus departs.

2020

PISTHETAIROS [*to Hercules*]

Oh dear, dear—how he's trying to play with you.
Come on over here—let me tell you something.

[*Pisthetairos and Hercules talk apart from the others.*]

You uncle's putting one over on you,
you poor fool—because, according to the law,
you don't get the smallest piece of property
from your father's goods. You're illegitimate—
you're a bastard.

[1650]

HERCULES

A bastard? What do you mean?

PISTHETAIROS

I mean just what I say. Now, your mother—
she was an alien woman. And Athena—
do you think a daughter could inherit
if she's got legal brothers?

2030

HERCULES [*very puzzled*]

But once he dies,
couldn't my dad leave me all his property
as a bastard's share?

PISTHETAIROS

The law won't let him.
The first one to claim your father's property
will be Poseidon here, who's raised your hopes.
He'll claim he's your father's legal brother.
I'll read you what Solon's laws dictate—

[1660]

[*Pisthetairos pulls a piece of paper out and reads.*]

BIRDS

“If there are lawful children, then a bastard
has no rights as a close blood relative.
If there are no lawful children, the goods
go to the nearest next of kin.”

2040

HERCULES

What!

I don't get anything from my dad's stuff?

PISTHETAIROS

Not a thing, by god. So tell me this—
has your father introduced you to his kin group yet?¹

HERCULES

No, not me. As a matter of fact,
I've been wondering about that for some time.

PISTHETAIROS

Well, don't just stare up there, mouth wide open,
planning an assault. Join up with us instead.
I'll make you a king and give you bird's milk.

2050

HERCULES

I've always thought you're right in what you say
about the girl. I'd hand her over to you.

PISTHETAIROS [*to Poseidon*]

What do you say?

POSEIDON

I vote no.

PISTHETAIROS

So now,
it's up to the Triballian here. What you say?

TRIBALLIAN

De geerl geeve over greet souvrin bridies.

HERCULES

There! He says to hand her over.

¹A kin group (phrateres) was a group of citizens who shared a common ancestor.

BIRDS

POSEIDON

No by god! [1680]
he never said to give her up—no way.
He's just babbling like a swallow.

HERCULES

So he said hand her over to the swallows!

POSEIDON

You two work it out—agree on peace terms. 2060
Since you're both for it, I'll say nothing more.

HERCULES

We're ready now to give you all you ask.
So come along with us in person—
up to heaven—there you can get your Princess,
and all those other things as well.

PISTHETAIROS [*pointing to the cooking he's been preparing*]

So these birds were slaughtered in good time
before the wedding feast.

HERCULES

If you want to,
I could stay here and roast the meat. You go. [1690]

POSEIDON

Roast the meat? You mean you'd wolf it down,
you glutton. Come on with us. Let's go. 2070

HERCULES [*reluctantly leaving*]

I'd have enjoyed eating that.

PISTHETAIROS [*calling to his slaves*]

Hey, you—
one of you bring me out some wedding clothes!

[*Pisthetairus, Poseidon, Hercules, and the Triballian god leave.*]

CHORUS

In lands of Litigation there's a place—
it's right beside the water clock—
where that villainous and thieving race
of tongue-and-belly men all flock.

BIRDS

They use their tongues to sow and reap,
to harvest grapes and figs en masse.
A crude barbarian tribe, a heap [1700]
of Philipses and Gorgias. 2080
From these horse-loving sycophants,
who use their tongues to cram their gut,
through all of Attica's expanse
in sacrifice the tongue's first cut.¹

[Enter Second Herald.]

SECOND HERALD

You here who've done fine things, more wonderful
than I can say, you thrice-blessed race with wings,
you birds, welcome now your king on his return,
as he comes back among these wealthy halls.
Here he approaches—you'll never see a star
so bright in any gleaming home of gold. 2090 [1710]
No—not even the far-reaching rays of sun
have ever shone as splendidly as he,
the man who brings with him his lovely wife,
too beautiful for words, and brandishing
the winged thunderbolt from Zeus. Sweet smells
are rising up, high into heaven's vault,
a glorious spectacle, and wisps of smoke
from burning incense are blown far and wide.
Here he is in person. Let the sacred Muse
open her lips in a triumphal holy song. 2100

[Enter Pisthetairos and his bride Princess.]

CHORUS

Back off, break up, make room— [1720]
And wing your way around the man
so blessed with blissful fortune.
O, O—such beauty and such youth!
What a blessing for this city of the birds
is this fine marriage you have made.

¹These lines attack the Sophists who earned their living by teaching rhetoric. Gorgias was a famous sophist and Philip was his pupil and disciple. They are called horse-loving either to suggest extravagant ambitions or their non-Athenian tribal origins. In sacrificing an animal, the Athenians cut out the tongue first. The suggestion seems to be that that's what the speaker would like to do with the Sophists.

BIRDS

A great good fortune now attends us,
the race of birds—such mighty bliss,
thanks to this man. So welcome back
with nuptial chants and wedding songs
our man himself and his Princess.

2110

Olympian Hera and great Zeus
who rules the gods on lofty thrones
the Fates once joined with wedding songs.
O Hymen, Hymenaeus!¹

And rich young Eros in his golden wings
held tight the reins as charioteer
at Zeus's wedding to the happy Hera.

O Hymen, Hymenaeus,
O Hymen, Hymenaeus.

2120

PISTHETAIROS

Your chants fill me with great delight,
as do you songs. And I just love your words.

CHORUS

Come now, celebrate in song
earth-shattering thunder, Zeus's lightning fire—
which now belong to him—
that dreaded bolt white lightning, too.
Oh, that great golden blaze of lightning,
that immortal fiery spear of Zeus,
and groaning thunders bringing rain—
with you this man now rattles Earth.
And everything that Zeus once had,
he's got it all—and that includes
our Princess, who once sat by Zeus's throne.
O Hymen, Hymenaeus!

2130

[1750]

PISTHETAIROS

Now all you feathered tribes of friends,
come follow me on this my wedding flight.
Let's wing our way up there to Zeus's house
and to our wedding bed. Reach out your hand,

¹A customary salute to the gods of marriage.

BIRDS

my blissful love, and take hold of my wing—
then dance with me. I'll lift and carry you.

[1760]
2140

[Pisthetairos and Princess lead the procession off the stage.]

CHORUS

Alalalalai—
Raise triumphal cries of joy,
sing out the noble victor's song—
the mightiest and highest of all gods!

[The procession exits singing and dancing, accompanying Pisthetairos and his bride up to Heaven.]

BIRDS

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATOR

Ian Johnston is a retired college and university instructor at Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada. A number of his translations have been published by Richer Resources Publications, as follows:

Aeschylus, *Oresteia*
Aeschylus, *Persians*
Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*
Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*
Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*
Aristophanes, *Birds*
Aristophanes, *Clouds*
Aristophanes, *Frogs*
Aristophanes, *Knights*
Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*
Aristophanes, *Peace*
Cuvier, *Discourse on Revolutionary Upheavals on the Surface of the Earth*
Descartes, *Discourse on Method*
Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*
Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*
Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*
Euripides, *Bacchae*
Euripides, *Medea*
Euripides, *Orestes*
Homer, *Iliad* (Complete and Abridged)
Homer, *Odyssey* (Complete and Abridged)
Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*
Kant, *On Perpetual Peace*
Kant, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*
Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*
Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*
Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*
Nietzsche, *Uses and Abuses of History*
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
Sophocles, *Ajax*
Sophocles, *Antigone*
Sophocles, *Electra*
Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*
Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*
Sophocles, *Philoctetes*

BIRDS

Some of these titles have been published as recordings by Naxos Audiobooks. Ian Johnston maintains a website at the following address (where these translated text are freely available):

records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/index.htm