

ily cere-
cahier

the birds
aristophanes

Aristophanes' The Birds

**Translated with
Introduction and Notes**

Jeffrey Henderson
Boston University

Aristophanes' Birds

CHARACTERS

SPEAKING CHARACTERS

Euelpides, an Athenian
Peisetaerus, an Athenian
Slave of Tereus
Tereus, turned hoopoe
Priest
Poet
Oracle Collector
Meton
Inspector, from Athens
Decree Seller
First Messenger

Second Messenger
Iris
First Herald
Father Beater
Cinesias, a dithyrambic poet
Informer
Prometheus
Poseidon
Heracles
Triballian, a god
Second Herald

SILENT CHARACTERS

Xanthias and
Manodorus/Manes, Slaves
of Euelpides and Peisetaerus
Slaves of Tereus
Flamingo, a bird
Mede, a bird

Hoopoe, a bird
Gobbler, a bird
Procne, turned nightingale
Piper, costumed as a raven
Slaves, as archers and slingers
Princess

CHORUS of Birds

PROLOGUE

(Euelpides, Peisetaerus, Slave, Tereus)

Euelpides°

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

Peisetaerus°

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

1 A fictitious name meaning "Confident."

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

Euelpides

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

Peisetaerus

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

5

Euelpides

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

Peisetaerus

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

10

Euelpides

God no, from here not even Execestides could!¹¹

Peisetaerus

Damn!

Euelpides

Travel your own side of the road, my friend.

Peisetaerus

He's really done us dirty, that man from the bird market
who sells by the tray, that crazy Philocrates.¹²

He claimed these two would point the way to Tereus,¹³
the hoopoe who once was human and became a bird;
and he sold us that Son of Tharraleides¹⁴ there,
the jackdaw, for one obol, and this crow here for three.

15

But they turn out to know nothing at all but nipping.

What are you gaping at this time? Do you mean to take us
into these cliffs somewhere? There's no passage here.

20

Euelpides

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

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

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

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

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

Peisetaerus

This crow's saying something about the passage;
oh yes indeed, it's croaking differently now.

Euelpides

Well, what's it say about the passage, then? 25

Peisetaerus

Oh nothing; just that it plans to bite off my fingers!

Euelpides

Now isn't this a terrible situation!
Just when we're both ready and eager to go
straight to the buzzards, we can't even find the way!
The thing is, you gentlemen there in the audience, 30
we're sick with the opposite of Sacas's³¹ sickness:
see, he's a non-citizen trying to force his way in,

while we, men of good standing in tribe and clan,
solid citizens, with no one trying to shoo us away,
have up and left our country with both feet flying. 35

Now it's not that we hate the city of Athens *per se*,
as if it weren't essentially great and blest,
where all can watch their wealth fly away in fines.

But the thing of the matter is, cicadas chirp
on their boughs for only a month or two, while Athenians, 40
they harp on their lawsuits all their livelong lives.

That's why we're trekking this trek, and wandering
with basket, kettle, and myrtle boughs⁴³ in search
of a peaceable place, a place where we can settle
down and simply pass our lives in peace. 45

Our mission now is to see Tereus the Hoopoe;
we need to learn from him if on his flights
he's seen that sort of city anywhere.

Peisetaerus

Hey!

Euelpides

What is it?

Peisetaerus

This crow's been trying for quite a while
to show me something up there.

31 Sacas, "the Sacasian" (an Asian Scythian), was a nickname for the tragic dramatist Acestor, who had evidently had trouble certifying his Athenian citizenship.

43 Implements used ceremonially in founding a settlement.

Euelpides

This jackdaw here 50

has been gaping upwards too, as if pointing me
toward something. There must be birds in the area.
We'll soon find out, if we start to make some noise.

Peisetaerus

Say, why don't you thump that rock there with your leg?

Euelpides

You thump it with your head, we'll get twice the noise. 55

Peisetaerus

Then get a stone and knock.

Euelpides

I will. Boy! Boy!

Peisetaerus

Hey, what are you saying? Calling the Hoopoe "boy"?
You should be calling "oh Hoopoe," not "hey boy."

Euelpides

Oh Hoopoe! You'll only make me keep knocking, you know.
Oh, Hoopoe!

Slave

Who's there? Who's shouting for the master? 60

Peisetaerus

God save us, will you look at the size of that beak!

Slave

Oh heaven help me, here's a pair of birdnappers!

Peisetaerus

Imagine speaking so harshly, and not more politely!

Slave

You're dead!

Peisetaerus

But we're not humans!

Slave

Then what are you?

Peisetaerus

Me? A yellowbelly; it's a Libyan bird. 65

Slave

What nonsense!

Peisetaerus

Really? Then check the back of my legs.

Slave

And this other one, what kind of bird is he? Speak up.

Euelpides

Me? I'm a brownbottom, a bird from the Pheasance.

Peisetaerus

And what kind of creature are you, in heaven's name?

Slave

Me, I'm a slavebird.

Euelpides

Vanquished by some fighting

70

cock?

Slave

No, it's just that when master became a hoopoe,
he prayed that I become a bird as well,
so that he could still have his butler and attendant.

Peisetaerus

Does a bird actually need to have some sort of butler?

Slave

He does, I guess because he once was human.
He'll get a craving for fish fry from Phalerum,
and I grab the pan and run out for the fish.
Or he'll want lentil soup, we need a ladle and tureen,
so I run for the tureen.

75

Peisetaerus

This one's a roadrunner.

So, roadrunner, know what you should do? Call out
your master.

80

Slave

Oh goodness no; he's just started
his nap, after lunching on myrtle berries and gnats.

Peisetaerus

Wake him anyway.

Slave

Well, I'm quite sure
he'll be annoyed, but as a favor I'll wake him.

Peisetaerus

And to hell with you, for scaring me to death!

85

Euelpides

Well I'll be damned, my jackdaw flew away
from me in terror!

Peisetaerus

You utter scaredy cat,
so scared you let him go!

Euelpides

Say, didn't you
fall down and let your own crow get away?

Peisetaerus

I certainly didn't.

Euelpides

Then where is it?

Peisetaerus

It just flew off.

90

Euelpides

So you didn't loose it, brave fellow that you are?

Tereus

Unbar the woods, that I may at last come forth!

Peisetaerus

Lord Heracles, what kind of beast is this?

What kind of plumage? What manner of triple crest?

Tereus

Who be those that seek me?

Euelpides

The Twelve Gods^o seem

95

to have made a mess of you.

Tereus

You wouldn't be mocking
me for my plumage? For, friends, I'll have you know
I once was human.

Peisetaerus

It's not you that's funny.

Tereus

What, then?

Euelpides

It's that beak of yours that looks so funny to us.

Tereus

That goes to show how shabbily Sophocles
treats me—Tereus!—in his tragedies.^o

100

⁹⁵ The standard Olympian pantheon.

¹⁰¹ In Sophocles' play (see 15 n.) Tereus seems to have been portrayed as an uncouth barbarian.

Peisetaerus

So you're Tereus? Are you a bird or a peacock?

Tereus

Me, I'm a bird.

Euelpides

Then where do you keep your feathers?

Tereus

They've fallen out.

Euelpides

Because of some disease?

Tereus

No; all birds shed their feathers in wintertime,
and then we grow back new ones once again.
But tell me now who you two are.

105

Peisetaerus

We're humans.

Tereus

What nationality?

Peisetaerus

The land of lovely triremes.^o

Tereus

Not jurors, I hope!^o

Euelpides

Oh no, the other kind:

we're jurophobes.

Tereus

Does that seed sprout there?

110

Euelpides

You'll find some in the country, if you look hard.

Tereus

Now then, what business brings you two up here?

Peisetaerus

We want to confer with you.

Tereus

And what about?

108 That is, Athens.

109 Athenian litigiousness was a national joke; Aristophanes had explored it in his play *Wasps* of 422.

Peisetaerus

Well, originally you were human, just like us,
 and once you owed people money, just like us, 115
 and once you enjoyed not repaying it, just like us;
 then trading all that for the guise of birds, you've flown
 the circuit of land and sea, and your mind contains
 everything a human's does, and everything
 a bird's does too. That's why we've come to visit, 120
 hoping you know of a nice cushy city, soft
 as a woollen blanket, where we could curl up and relax.

Tereus

Could you be looking for a city greater than the Cranaans'?

Peisetaerus

Not greater, no, just better suited to us.

Tereus

You're obviously looking for an aristocracy. 125

Peisetaerus

Who me? Not at all. Even Scellias' son makes me sick.^o

Tereus

Then, what kind of city would you most prefer to live in?

Peisetaerus

One where my very worst troubles would be like this:
 a friend appears at my door one morning and says,
 "Now swear to me by Zeus the Olympian 130
 I that you and your kids will take a bath and be
 at my place bright and early for a wedding feast.
 Now please don't let me down, for otherwise
 you needn't pay me a visit when I'm in trouble!"

Tereus

My word, it's miserable troubles that you long for! 135
 And you?

Euelpides

I long for much the same.

Tereus

Such as?

Euelpides

A city where the father of a blooming boy

123 Cranaus was a mythical king of Athens.

126 Aristocrates was a real politician and general, soon to be a supporter of oligarchy, but here his name alone is the joke.

would meet me and complain like this, as if wronged:
 "It's a dandy way you treat my son, Mr. Smoothy!
 You met him leaving the gymnasium after his bath,
 and you didn't kiss him, chat him up, or hug him,
 or fondle his balls—and you my old family friend!"

140

Tereus

Poor thing, what troubles you long for! Well, there's actually
 a happy city of the sort you two describe,
 on the shores of the Red Sea.

Euelpides

Absolutely not!

145

No seaside for us, where the *Salaminia*^o
 will pop up one morning with a summonser on board.
 Don't you know of a Greek city to tell us about?

Tereus

Why don't you go to Lepreus, in Elis,
 and settle there?

Euelpides

God! Lepreus makes me sick,

150

though I've never seen it, because of Melanthius.^o

Tereus

Well, then there's the *Opuntii* in Locris; you
 should settle there.

Euelpides

Not me; I wouldn't become
 an *Opuntius*^o if you gave me a talent of gold.

Peisetaerus

But what about this life with the birds? Describe it,
 for you know every detail.

155

Tereus

It wears quite nicely.

To begin with, you must get by without a wallet.

Euelpides

A lot of life's fraudulence disappears right there.

146 One of two sacred galleys in the Athenian navy (the other was the *Paralus*) used for official dispatches and transport.

151 A tragic poet, who apparently suffered from the skin disease *lepra*.

154 A man by this name is mentioned as one-eyed at line 1294, and also as beak-nosed in other comedies.

Tereus

And in the gardens we feed on white sesame seeds,
and myrtle-berries, and poppies, and watermint.¹⁶⁰ 160

Euelpides

Why, you birds are living the life of honeymooners!

Peisetaerus

Aha, aha!

Oh what a grand scheme I see in the race of birds,
and power that could be yours, if you take my advice!

Tereus

What advice would that be?

Peisetaerus

What advice? For starters,
don't fly around aimlessly with your beaks agape; 165
that's discreditable behavior. For example,
back home, if among the flighty crowd you ask,
"Who's that guy over there?" Teleas¹⁶⁸ will reply,
"The man's an absolute bird—unstable, flighty,
unverifiable, never staying put." 170

Tereus

By Dionysus, that's a fair criticism.
Well, how can it be helped?

Peisetaerus

Found a single city.

Tereus

But what kind of city could mere birds ever found?

Peisetaerus

Oh really, what an utterly doltish remark!
Look down.

Tereus

Very well, I'm looking.

Peisetaerus

Now look up. 175

Tereus

I'm looking.

160 Items associated in Athenian life with festive occasions.

168 Probably the son of Telenicus, and currently serving as a Treasurer of Athena; a wealthy politician (cf. 1024-5) ridiculed elsewhere for gluttony, political trickery, and shiftiness, among other faults. Here both the text and the point of the joke are uncertain.

Peisetaerus

Turn your head around.

Tereus

By heaven,

I'll be making real progress, if I sprain my neck!

Peisetaerus

Did you see anything?

Tereus

I saw the clouds and sky.

Peisetaerus

Well surely, then, you've seen the birds' own site.

Tereus

Their site? In what sense?

Peisetaerus

As it were, their place.

180

It's a place to *visit*, where everything makes a *transit*,
so that's why now it's merely called a *site*.

But as soon as you settle in and fortify it,
this *site* will instead start being called a *city*.

And then you'll rule over humans as over locusts;

185

and as for the gods, you'll destroy them by Melian famine.^o

Tereus

How?

Peisetaerus

What's between them and the earth? Air, right?

Look, we have to ask the Boeotians for a visa
whenever we want to visit Delphi, no?

Alright, whenever humans sacrifice to the gods,
you won't let the aroma of the thigh-bones pass
through, unless the gods pay you some tribute.

190

Tereus

Oho, I get it!

I swear by earth, by snares, by gins, by nets,
I've never heard a more elegant idea!

195

And so I'm happy to help you found this city,
if that's agreeable to the other birds.

Peisetaerus

And who's going to explain the plan to them?

186 In summer 416 the Athenians had besieged the small island of Melos, and upon its surrender exterminated the adult male population, for refusing to join the empire.

Tereus

You are.

I've long lived with them, and they're not the barbarians
they were before I taught them how to speak.

200

Peisetaerus

Then how will you call them together?

Tereus

Easily.

I'll just step right into my thicket here, and then
I'll rouse from sleep my own dear nightingale,^o
and we'll invite them to come. And if they hear
our voice the birds will speed here on the double.

205

Peisetaerus

Then, dearest of birds, please don't just stand around;
I implore you, go step into the thicket there
as quick as you can and rouse the nightingale!

PARODOS^o

(Tereus, Peisetaerus, Euelpides, Chorus)

Tereus

Come, my songmate, leave your sleep,
and loosen the strains of sacred songs,
that from your divine lips bewail
deeply mourned Itys, your child and mine,^o
trilling forth fluid melodies
from your vibrant throat.

210

Pure the sound

that ascends through green-tressed bryony
to Zeus' abode, where gold-tressed
Phoebus^o listens to your songs of grief
and, strumming in response his ivoryed
lyre, stirs the gods to their dance;
and from deathless lips arises
in harmonious accord
the divine refrain of the Blest.

215

220

Euelpides

Lord Zeus almighty, what a voice that birdy
has! How it turned the entire thicket to honey!

203 Procne, cf. 46 n.

208 *Parodos* is the term applied to that section of an Aristophanic comedy in which the Chorus is introduced, enters the *orchestra*, and performs its first song and dance.

212 See 15 n.

217 Apollo.

Peisetaerus

Hey there.

Euelpides

Hey what?

Peisetaerus

Be quiet!

Euelpides

Whatever for?

225

Peisetaerus

The Hoopoe's getting ready to sing again.

Tereus

Epopopoi popopopoi popoi,
ye ye co co co co
come ye hither every bird of fellow feather,

all who range over country acres 230

richly sown, the myriad tribes who feed on barleycorn,

and the races of seed pickers

that swiftly fly, casting a cozy cry;

and all who oft round the clod

in the furrow twitter delicately 235

this happy sound,

tio tio tio tio tio tio tio!

And all of you who pasture on ivy boughs
in the gardens,

and you eaters of oleaster and arbutus 240

in the hills,

come flying at once to my call:

trio to trio to to to brix!

And you who in marshy vales snap up
keen-mouthed gnats, and all who inhabit 245

the earth's drizzly places and Marathon's lovely meadow,^o

and the bird with dappled plumage,

francolin, francolin!

And all whose tribes fly with the halcyons

over the deep swell of the sea, 250

come hither to learn the latest!

Yes, here we're gathering all the tribes

246 Lovely only to birds, since Marathon (a deme 26 miles from Athens) was swampy and buggy.

of neck-stretching birds,
 for an acute old man has appeared,
 novel in ideas 255
 and a doer of novel deeds.

Now all attend the conference,
 hither hither hither hither!
 Torotorotorotorotix, 260
 kikkabau kikkabau,
 torotorotorolililix!

Peisetaerus

Do you see any birds?

Euelpides

I certainly don't,
 though I'm all agape from looking at the sky.

Peisetaerus

Then it seems the Hoopoe copied the curlew bird, 265
 entering the thicket and crying hoo-poo for nothing.

Tereus

Torotix torotix!

Euelpides

Maybe so, my friend, but look over here, a bird is coming!^o

Peisetaerus

That's a bird all right! Whatever can it be? Surely not a peacock?

Euelpides

Our host here will tell us himself. Say, what kind of bird is that? 270

Tereus

Not one of those commonplace birds you humans are used to seeing;
 he's a bird of the marshes.

Euelpides

My, how flamboyantly crimson he is!

Tereus

That stands to reason, because in fact his name is Flamingo.

Euelpides

Ho there, psst—yes, you!

Peisetaerus

What do you want?

268 The switch to long verses indicates the beginning of the *parodos* proper (209 n.).

Euelpides

Here's another bird!

Peisetaerus

Oh yes, there's another one, and he's also garbed in eccentric color. 275
Now who can this vatic songster be, this outlandish mountain-walker?

Tereus

This bird's called a Mede.

Euelpides

A Mede? Lord Heracles!

But if he's really a Mede, how did he fly here without a camel?°

Peisetaerus

Here's still another bird who's secured itself a crest.

Euelpides

What's this apparition? You mean you're not the only hoopoe, 280
this other's a hoopoe too?

Tereus

He's the son of Philocles' hoopoe,°
and I'm his grandfather, the same as you might say
Hipponicus son of Callias and Callias son of Hipponicus.°

Peisetaerus

So this bird is Callias. He's shed a lot of feathers.

Tereus

He's pedigreed, you see, so he gets plucked by shysters, 285
and the females too keep plucking away his plumage.

Euelpides

Lord Poseidon! Here's still another brightly tinted bird.
What on earth is this one called, I wonder?

Tereus

That one? Gobbler.

Peisetaerus

You mean there's another gobbler besides Cleonymus?°

278 The Athenians had not forgotten that the Medes (a people who inhabited what is now NW Iran) had used camels in their invasion of Greece in 480.

281 Philocles, nephew of Aeschylus and nicknamed "The Lark" (?476, 1295), wrote a tragic tetralogy *Pandionis*, which included Tereus' metamorphosis.

283 For five generations the heads of one wealthy and distinguished family of the Ceryces clan had alternated these names; the current Callias was often ridiculed as a flagrant wastrel.

289 A politician often ridiculed for obesity, gluttony, and effeminacy, and (uniquely) for having thrown away his shield in battle (see lines 1470-81).

Euelpides

If that were really Cleonymus, he'd surely have tossed his crest? 290

Peisetaerus

But I can't imagine what's the point of the birds' cresting?
Preparing for the race in arms?^o

Tereus

Oh no, my friend,
they're like the Carians: they nest on crests for safety's sake.^o

Peisetaerus

Poseidon, will you look at that! What a hell of a mob
of birds has gathered!^o

Euelpides

Lord Apollo, what a cloud of them! Whooee! 295
They're so many a-wing that you can't see into the wings anymore!

Peisetaerus

That one's a partridge.

Euelpides

And by god that one's a francolin.

Peisetaerus

And that one's a wigeon.

Euelpides

And that one's a halcyon.

Peisetaerus

So what's that one behind her?

Euelpides

That one there? A snippet.

Peisetaerus

You mean there's a snip-it bird?

Euelpides

Isn't Sporgilus one?^o 300

And there's an owl.

Peisetaerus

Say what? Who's brought an owl to Athens?^o

292 A footrace of about 370 meters in which the runners wore helmets (crested) and carried shields.

293 Many towns in Caria (an area in SW Asia Minor) had hilltop citadels.

294 Enter the Chorus, each member costumed as a different bird.

300 Sporgilus ("Sparrow") was the name of a barber.

301 Proverbial, like "coals to Newcastle."

Euelpides

Jay. Turtledove. Lark. Reed Warbler. Thyme-finch. Rock Dove.
Vulture. Hawk. Ring Dove. Cuckoo. Redshank. Red-head Shrike.
Porphyron. Kestrel. Dabchick. Bunting. Lammergeier. Woodpecker.

Peisetaerus

Whooee, all the birds! Whooee, all the peckers! 305
Oh how they peep and run around, outscreeching each another!
Say, can they be threatening us? Oh dear, they've certainly got
their beaks open, and they're staring at you and me!

Euelpides

I think so too!

Chorus

Whe-whe-whe-whe-whe-whe-where's the one who called me?
What spot is he settled on? 310

Tereus

Here I am ready and waiting, and not aloof from friends.

Chorus

Wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-what message then
have you got for your friends? 315

Tereus

One concerning us all, promoting our security, right, gratifying,
advantageous!
You see, two men are here to visit me, a pair of subtle thinkers.

Chorus

Where? How? What do you mean?

Tereus

I say, a pair of old men are here from the human world, 320
and they've come bearing the prop of a prodigious plan.

Chorus Leader

Oh, you've made the worst blunder since I was fledged!
What did you say?

Tereus

Don't be flustered yet.

Chorus Leader

What have you done to us?

Tereus

I've received two men passionately enamored of our society.

Chorus Leader

You've actually done this?

Tereus

Yes I have, and I'm glad I did. 325

Chorus Leader

And they're already somewhere among us?

Tereus

As sure as I'm among you.

FIRST CONTEST (AGON)^o*(Chorus, Chorus Leader, Peisetaerus, Euelpides, Tereus)*Chorus (strophe)^o

Oo, oo!

We are betrayed, we are impiously defiled!

Yes, our former friend, who browsed with us

in the fields that feed us all, 330

has broken our ancient ordinances,

has broken our avian oaths.

He's lured me into a trap,

he's cast me out among an unholy race,

that since its very creation

has been groomed to be my foe. 335

Chorus Leader

Well, him we'll settle accounts with at a later time;

as for these two codgers, I think they should give us satisfaction

on the spot, by being dismembered.

Peisetaerus

So we're goners.

Euelpides

This damned mess we're in is all your fault, you know!

Why did you bring me here from back there?

Peisetaerus

To keep me company. 340

327 The *Agon*, or formal debate, is a standard structural feature of Old Comedy consisting of formal arguments in long-verses by two contestants, each argument prefaced by a choral song and an introduction by the chorus leader; the chorus leader usually presides and may (along with the idle contestant) interject comments or questions to break up or otherwise enliven the long speeches.

327 The songs and dances performed in the orchestra by a Greek dramatic chorus were normally strophic, that is, they were composed in two or more strophes (stanzas) that "respond" (have the same rhythmical structure); the first song in a responding pair is called the strophe, the second the antistrophe.

Euelpides

To make me cry bitter tears, you mean!

Peisetaerus

You're talking rot;

how do you expect to cry once you've had your eyes pecked out?

Chorus (antistrophe)

Hi ho!

Forward march, launch a hostile
bloody charge, from all sides

345

put wings to them and surround them!

For both these two must howl
and furnish fodder for my beak.

For there's no dusky mountain,
no lofty cloud, no leaden sea

to receive this pair
in flight from me.

350

Chorus Leader

Now without further ado let's pluck and peck these two.

Where's the lieutenant? Have him bring up the right wing.

Euelpides

This is it! Poor goner, where can I hide?

Peisetaerus

Hold your ground there!

Euelpides

And let them dismember me?

Peisetaerus

But how do you expect

355

to get away?

Euelpides

I've no idea.

Peisetaerus

Well, here's what we should do:

we should stand and fight, and make use of some of those kettles!

Euelpides

What good will a kettle do us?

Peisetaerus

It'll keep the owls away.

Euelpides

But what about those with the hooked talons there?

Peisetaerus

Grab a skewer

and plant it in front of you.

Euelpides

And what about our eyes?

360

Peisetaerus

Take out a saucer and shield them with it, or a bowl.

Euelpides

Oh brilliant! A fine piece of improvisation and generalship.
In clever stratagems you've already outstripped Nicias!^o

Chorus Leader

Ta dum ta da! Move out, level your beaks, no hanging back!
Drag, pluck, hit and flay them! First knock out the kettle!

365

Tereus

Say, you scurviest of all creatures, why do you aim
to destroy and mutilate two men who've done you no harm,
who are my wife's kinsmen and fellow tribesmen?^o

Chorus Leader

You're saying these men merit any more mercy than wolves?
What enemies could we take revenge on more hateful than these? 370

Tereus

But suppose they're enemies by nature, yet friends by intention,
and they've come here to give you some beneficial instruction?

Chorus Leader

How could these men ever give us any beneficial instruction
or advice? They were already enemies of our very forefathers!

Tereus

And yet the wise can learn a lot from their enemies. 375
Caution does save the day—a lesson you can't learn
from a friend, but the very first lesson an enemy imposes.
For instance, it was from enemies, not friends, that cities
learned to erect lofty walls and master warships,
and it's that lesson that safeguards children, household,
and property. 380

Chorus Leader

Well, in our opinion it's possible to hear them out first;
the wise can discover some benefit even from enemies.

363 Probably a reference to that general's victory at Syracuse the previous autumn.

368 Procne (see 15 n.) was the daughter of the legendary Athenian king, Pandion.

Peisetaerus

They look to be slackening their anger. Fall back by steps.

Tereus

Besides, it's only fair, and plus, you owe me one.

Chorus Leader

Well, we've surely never opposed you in anything before. 385

Euelpides

They're acting more peaceable.

Peisetaerus

Indeed they are. So lower the kettle
and the two bowls;
and we should shoulder the spear—
I mean the skewer—and walk patrol 390
inside our encampment, looking along
the very rim of the kettle,
close in, since we mustn't run away.

Euelpides

But tell me, if we do get killed,
where on earth will we be buried?

Peisetaerus

Potter's Field will take us.° 395
You see, we'll get a state funeral
by telling the generals
that we died fighting the enemy
at the Battle of Finchburg.°

DUET

(Chorus Leader, Tereus)

Chorus Leader

Re-form ranks as before, 400
lean over and ground your temper
alongside your anger, like infantrymen;
and let's find out who these men may be,
where they've come from,
and with what in mind. 405
Hey there, Hoopoe, I'm calling on you!

395 The Cerameicus, the potters' quarter of Athens where military funerals were held.

399 In the previous year an Athenian contingent had assisted in the siege of Orneae (orneon "bird"), a town in the Argolid, but its defenders slipped away and there was no battle.

Tereus

And what is your wish in calling?

Chorus Leader

Who may these men be, and whence?

Tereus

Two strangers from clever Greece.

Chorus Leader

And what chance
can have brought them
on a journey to the birds? 410

Tereus

A passionate desire
for your way of life,
to share your home
and be with you completely!

Chorus Leader

What do you mean?
And what tales is he telling? 415

Tereus

Incredible and beyond belief.

Chorus Leader

Does he see a way to cash in on his visit,
convinced that being with me
he'll overpower his enemy
or be able to help his friends? 420

Tereus

He promises great prosperity, ineffable
and incredible, for
he makes a convincing case
that you can have it all—what's here,
and there, and everywhere. 425

Chorus Leader

Is he insane?

Tereus

Oh, how unutterably sane!

Chorus Leader

There's wisdom in his heart?

Tereus

He's the craftiest fox,
all cleverness, a go-getter, a smoothie, the crème de la craft! 430

Chorus Leader

Tell him to speak, to speak!
 For as I listen to the tale you tell
 I'm all aflutter.

EPISODE

(*Tereus, Peisetaerus, Euelpides, Chorus Leader*)

Tereus

All right then, you and you take my panoply
 back inside and hang it in the kitchen— 435
 knock on wood—by the trivet. And you inform
 and brief these birds about the proposals I summoned
 them to hear.

Peisetaerus

By god, I'll do nothing of the kind,
 not unless they promise me the very same deal
 as once upon a time the monkey made 440
 with his woman, you know, the knifemaker:^o that they're not
 to bite me or yank my balls or poke my—

Euelpides

You
 can't mean the—

Peisetaerus

Not at all; the eyes, I meant to say.

Chorus Leader

Then that's a promise.

Peisetaerus

Now swear to me you'll keep it!

Chorus Leader

So help me a victory by unanimous vote 445
 of all the judges and the audience—^o

Peisetaerus

Amen!

Chorus Leader

but if I lie, to win by only one vote.

440 The various guesses in the scholia show that not even ancient scholars could explain this allusion.

445 Momentarily speaking as a performer in the dramatic competition.

Peisetaerus

Now hear this: the infantry may retrieve
their arms and go back home, but should keep an eye
on the boards for any notices we may post.

450

SECOND CONTEST (AGON)

(*Chorus, Chorus Leader, Peisetaerus, Euelpides*)

Chorus (strophe)

A treacherous thing every time in every way
is human nature. But do make your case, for perhaps
you may divulge a good quality that you see in me
or some greater potential
overlooked by my witless mind.

455

Explain to us all this perception of yours,
for whatever advantage you may provide me
will be an advantage for us all.

Chorus Leader

Now then, about this idea of yours that you've come to sell us:
explain it, and never fear, we won't break the truce till you do.

460

Peisetaerus

Well, I'm bursting to tell you, and I've got a special speech
whipped up,
which nothing stops me from kneading into cake. A garland, boy,
and water for my hands, right now.

Euelpides

We having dinner, or what?

Peisetaerus

No no, I've long been trying to make a big juicy utterance
that will shatter these birds to the very soul. So sorrowful am I
for you, who once were kings—

465

Chorus Leader

Us kings? Of what?

Peisetaerus

Yes you,
of all that exists, from yours truly up to Zeus himself,
and born a long time before Cronus, and the Titans, and even Earth.^o

Chorus Leader

Even Earth?

467 Peisetaerus appeals to the standard divine succession-myth, for which see Hesiod, *Theogony* 133-210.

Peisetaerus

Yes, by Apollo.

Chorus Leader

I certainly never heard that.

470

Peisetaerus

You're just ignorant and uninquisitive, and you haven't thumbed your Aesop.^o

He says in his fable that the Lark was the first of all birds to be born, before Earth; and then her father perished of a disease, but there being no earth, he'd lain out for four days^o and she didn't know

what to do, till in desperation she buried her father in her own head.

475

Euelpides

So that's why to this day the Lark's father lies dead in the Head.^o

Peisetaerus

So if they were born before Earth and before the gods, it would follow that the kingship is rightfully theirs by primogeniture!

Chorus Leader

By Apollo, it does.

Euelpides

Then you should plan on growing a beak, for Zeus won't be quick to return his sceptre to the woodpecker!

480

Peisetaerus

Now then, it didn't used to be gods who ruled mankind and were kings, but birds, and I have lots of evidence for this. I'll start by showing you that the cock first ruled and reigned over the Persians, before all those Dariuses and Megabazuses,^o and that's why he's still called the Persian Bird, in memory of that reign.

485

Euelpides

So that's why to this day he struts about like the Great King, the only bird who gets to wear his hat cocked!

471 The legendary animal fabulist, thought to have lived in early sixth-century Samos.

474 In Athens the "laying out" was held the day after death, and burial the following morning.

476 The deme Cephale ("Head") was the site of a large cemetery. There is perhaps another reference to Philocles the Lark (281 n.).

484 Darius I reigned 522-486 and was repulsed by the Athenians at Marathon in 490; Megabazus (in Greek the name suggests "big-talker") was a commander during his reign.

Peisetaerus

So powerful, so great and mighty was he, that to this very day,
 as a result of that long-ago power, he has only to sing reveille
 and everyone jumps up to work: smiths, potters, tanners, cobblers, 490
 bathmen, grain traders, the carpentering, lyre-pegging,
 shield-fastening crowd.

In the dark men put on their shoes and set forth—

Euelpides

I'll vouch for that!

I lost a coat of Phrygian wool, poor bastard, thanks to him.
 I'd been invited to the city for a child's naming day,
 and had a bit to drink and a nap, when right before dinner 495
 that bird up and crowed. I thought it was morning and leave for
 Halimus.

I leave the city walls and a mugger saps me with a club.
 I fall down, and before I can yell, he's already extracted my coat!

Peisetaerus

To resume: back then the kite was the ruler and king over Greece.

Chorus Leader

Over Greece? .

Peisetaerus

That's right, and as king he instituted the custom 500
 of rolling on the ground before kites.^o

Euelpides

Yes, I rolled with the rest
 when I saw a kite, and when I was on my back with my mouth open
 I swallowed an obol,^o so I had to lug my sack home empty.

Peisetaerus

What's more, the cuckoo was king of all Egypt and Phoenicia;
 and whenever the cuckoo said "cuckoo," all the Phoenicians 505
 would start reaping the wheat and barley in their fields.

Euelpides

So that's what that saying means, "Cuckoo! Knobs out and up
 country!"^o

501 At their first appearance each year, as being harbingers of spring.

503 Lacking pockets, Athenians carried small coins in their mouths.

507 Perhaps a reveille call meaning "arise and prepare to march;" "knobs" translates *psolai*, a word referring to men with foreskins exposed (suggesting erection in the case of Greeks, who did not practice circumcision; and circumcision in the case of barbarians, who did).

Peisetaerus

And so dominant was their dominion that in the Greek cities
 if some Agamemnon or Menelaus ever *was* king,
 a bird would be perched on his sceptre, getting a share of
 his presents. 510

Euelpides

You know, that's something I never realized. I was always bewildered
 when in the tragedies someone like Priam came on with a bird, but of
 course
 it was perched there to watch what presents Lysicrates° pocketed.

Peisetaerus

But the absolute clincher is that Zeus, the current king,
 stands with an eagle on his head as an emblem of royalty, 515
 as does his daughter° with an owl, and Apollo, *qua* servant, with a
 hawk.

Chorus Leader

By Demeter, that's absolutely right—but why have they got them?

Peisetaerus

Well, when a sacrificer puts guts into the god's hand, as is customary,
 why, the birds themselves can grab the guts before Zeus can!
 And in those days nobody'd swear by a god; they all swore
 by birds. 520

Even today Lampon° swears "by Goose" when he's pulling a scam.
 That's how high and holy everyone deemed you then;
 but now you're mere knaves, simpletons, tomfools!

These days they pelt you like lunatics;
 and even in the temples 525

every bird-hunter's out to get you,
 setting nooses, snares, limed twigs,
 toils, meshes, nets, decoys in traps.
 And when they catch you they sell you wholesale,
 and the customers get to feel you up. 530

And if they do buy you, they're not content
 to have you roasted and served up;
 no, they grate on cheese, oil,
 silphium, vinegar, and they whip up
 a second sauce, sweet and shiny, 535

513 Evidently an office holder or politician; the name is not uncommon.

516 Athena.

521 A distinguished authority on oracles and religious protocol, and prominent in public life since the 440s; ridiculed elsewhere in comedy for high living.

and baste it on hot,
when you're hot yourselves,
like meat from carcasses!

Chorus (antistrophe)

Very harrowing, yes very, is the tale
you've brought us, human. It made me weep 540
at my fathers' baseness,
who in my own time have wrecked these privileges of mine
that my forebears bequeathed to them.
But now you're here, by the grace of god or some happy chance,
to be my savior. 545
So shall I live, entrusting to you
my nestlings and myself.

Chorus Leader

Now instruct us what we should do, because our life won't be
worth living, unless at all costs we recover our sovereignty.

Peisetaerus

Then I instruct you first to make a single city of birds; 550
then encircle the whole atmosphere, all the area between
the earth and sky, with a wall of big baked bricks, like Babylon.

Chorus Leader

Cebriones and Porphyryon,^o what a redoubtable citadel!

Peisetaerus

And when that's up and ready, reclaim your rulership from Zeus;
] if he refuses, and isn't willing, and doesn't give up at once, 555
declare a holy war against him, and deny the gods
] the right to travel through your territory with erections,
the way they used to descend for adultery with their Alcmenes^o
and Alopes^o and Semeles.^o And if they do trespass,
then clap a seal on their boners, so they can't fuck any more
women. 560

And I urge you to despatch another bird as a herald to mankind,
to say that, the birds being sovereign, they must henceforth sacrifice
to the birds, and only afterwards to the gods; and that they must aptly
assign to each of the gods the bird who's a fitting counterpart:
if the offering's to Aphrodite, offer nuts to the phall-arope bird; 565
if the offering's a sheep to Poseidon, consecrate granola to the duck;

553 Two of the Giants, whose rebellion against the Olympian gods was crushed in the Plain of Phlegra (cf. lines 824-25); porphyryon was also the name of a bird.

558 Alcmena, Amphytryon's wife, was mother by Zeus of Heracles.

559 Alopes, Cercyon's daughter, was mother by Poseidon of Hippothoon.

559 Semele, Cadmus' daughter, was mother by Zeus of Dionysus.

if something's to be offered to Heracles, offer honeypies to the cormorant;
 and if it's a ram for Zeus the King, the nuthatch is a king bird,^o
 and it's to him, not Zeus, that a gnat with intact nuts must be slaughtered.

Euelpides

I like that, slaughtering a gnat! So let the great Zan^o thunder away! 570

Chorus Leader

But how are humans supposed to believe we're gods and not daws?
 We fly and have wings.

Peisetaerus

That's nonsense! Why, Hermes certainly flies
 and wears wings, and he's a god, and so do a great many other gods;
 Victory, for one, flies on golden wings, and so does Cupid,
 and according to Homer Iris is "like to a trembling dove."^o 575

Euelpides

And won't Zeus thunder at us and hurl his "wingéd lightning bolt"?

Peisetaerus

But if out of ignorance they still consider you nothing
 and consider the Olympians gods, then a cloud of sparrows
 and seed pickers must arise and gobble up their seed in the fields.
 Then when they're famished, let Demeter^o dole out grain to them! 580

Euelpides

She'll renege, by Zeus; mark my words, she'll just make excuses.^o

Peisetaerus

And the ravens should peck out the eyes of the oxen harnessed
 to plough their land, and of their sheep, as a challenge.
 Then let Apollo the Healer heal them—and earn his fee!

Euelpides

Please, wait at least until I've sold my own pair of oxen! 585

Peisetaerus

But if they accept you as god, as Zeus, as Earth, as Cronus, as
 Poseidon,
 then all good things will be theirs.

568 It is unclear what bird *orchilos* refers to (perhaps the wren), and why it was a "king" bird (perhaps a reference to the wren's gold crown or to Aesop's fable 434); the translation preserves the pun on *orchēis* "testicles."

570 A cultic form of Zeus' name.

575 *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 114.

580 Demeter ("Mother Earth"), the Roman Ceres, was the goddess responsible for the fertility of crops, especially cereal grains.

581 As comic poets alleged of populist politicians.

Chorus Leader

What good things, for example?

Peisetaerus

For starters, the locusts won't devour their vine blooms;
 a single contingent of owls and kestrels will wipe them out.
 Then again, the mites and the gallflies won't always devour their fig
 trees; 590
 a single flock of thrushes will eat them all clean up.

Chorus Leader

But how will we give them wealth? Because that's their principal
 passion.

Peisetaerus

When they practice augury these birds will give them the
 motherlodes,
 and to the diviner they'll reveal the profitable voyages,
 so that no shipowner will be lost.

Chorus Leader

Won't be lost? How so? 595

Peisetaerus

When he asks the diviner about a voyage, a bird will tip him:
 "Don't sail, a storm's on its way;" "Sail now, you'll make a profit."

Euelpides

I'm buying a ship and taking on cargo—not staying with you guys!

Peisetaerus

And they'll show them the hoards of silver that the old-timers buried;
 these birds know where they lie. You do hear everyone say, 600
 "No one but maybe some bird knows where *my* treasure lies."

Euelpides

I'm selling that ship, getting a shovel, and digging up pots!

Chorus Leader

But how will birds give them health? That rests with the gods.

Peisetaerus

If they're wealthy, they're plenty healthy, no?

Euelpides

You know it!
 No human's healthy at all if he's doing poorly. 605

Chorus Leader

But how will they reach old age? That's also up to Olympus.
 Or must they die when they're tykes?

Peisetaerus

Heavens no, the birds will add
an extra 300 years to their lives.

Chorus Leader

Where from?

Peisetaerus

Why, from themselves:
don't you know that "five ages of man lives the croaking crow"?°

Euelpides

Well dammit, these birds are far better kings for us than Zeus! 610

Peisetaerus

Far better for sure!
To begin with, we needn't
build them marble temples
and gild the gates with gold;
they'll make their homes 615
in copses and woods,
while for the bird VIPs an olive tree
will be their temple.
And we'll not be going to Delphi or Ammon°
and sacrificing there; instead we'll stand 620
among strawberries and wild olives
holding grains of barley and wheat
in our outstretched hands,
and pray to them to give us a share of blessings;
and we'll get these blessings right away, 625
just for tossing them some grains of wheat!

LYRIC SCENE

(*Chorus Leader, Chorus, Peisetaerus, Tereus, Euelpides, Procne*)

Chorus Leader

Old man, my worst foe changed to my very best friend,
there's no way I could ever choose to discard this idea of yours!

Chorus

Emboldened by your words,
I give notice and solemnly swear: 630
if you bring to my cause congenial proposals,
and fairly, squarely, righteously attack the gods,

609 From a lost work of Hesiod, fragment 304.

619 A ram-headed Egyptian god, identified by the Greeks with Zeus, who had an oracular shrine at the Siwa oasis in Libya.

tuning your thoughts to mine, then not much longer
will the gods be abusing my sceptre!

Chorus Leader

So in the tasks that call for brawn, we're ready for duty; 635
in the plans that call for brains, you be in charge of all that.

Peisetaerus

Well then, there's absolutely no time left for napping
or a spell of Nicias' Paralysis;^o
no, we've got to accomplish something, and fast!

Tereus

But first 640
do come along inside, come into my nest,
that is, such sticks and twigs as I call home,
and both of you tell us your names.

Peisetaerus

That's easy enough:
my name is Peisetaerus, and this one here
is Euelpides of Crioia.^o

Tereus

A hearty welcome 645
to you both!

Peisetaerus

We thank you.

Tereus

Well then, do come in.

Peisetaerus

Well, let's go in. Please, show us in.

Tereus

Come on, then!

Peisetaerus

But, um, hold on, reverse oars back this way!
Look here, please tell us, how can my pal and I
be your partners when you all can fly but we can't? 650

Tereus

Just fine.

638 Nicias had urged caution in sending the armada against Sicily (Thucydides 6.8, 25),
and then had failed to follow up his victory before Syracuse (6.71).

644 For the significance of the names see 1-2 nn. Crioia was an actual Attic deme, but the
comic point is unclear.

Peisetaerus

Mind you now, there's a story in Aesop's fables
concerning the fox, how once upon a time
she fared very poorly in partnership with an eagle.^o

Tereus

Never fear, I know of a certain little root;
just chew it and you'll get a pair of wings.

655

Peisetaerus

It's a deal; let's go inside. Come on then, Xanthias
and Manodorus, pick up the baggage there.

Chorus Leader

Yoo hoo! Yes you. A word, please.

Tereus

What's the matter?

Chorus Leader

Take these men
and lunch them well; but that mellifluous nightingale, the Muses'
chorister,
bring her out here and leave her with us; we'd like to play
with her.

660

Peisetaerus

Oh yes, by all means do just what they ask!
Bring the chick out here, out of the tickle grass.

Euelpides

My heavens yes, do bring her out; we'd like
to have a look at the nightingale ourselves.

Tereus

Well, if that's what you both want, I must oblige.
Oh Procne! Come out and say hello to our guests.

665

Peisetaerus

Good god almighty, what a beautiful chick!
So tender and fair!

Euelpides

Know what I'd like to do?
I'd really like to spread those drumsticks of hers!

653 The fable (Aesop 1, first attested in Archilochus fragments 172-81) tells how the eagle had betrayed the fox by feeding her cubs to its eaglets, and the flightless fox could only curse the eagle; but when the eagle took hot goat-meat from an altar she set her nest afire, and the fox ate the eaglets as they fell.

Peisetaerus

She's got quite a choker, like a debutante!

670

Euelpides

Me, I think I'd also like to kiss her.

Peisetaerus

Look, you screw-up, her beak's a pair of skewers!

Euelpides

OK, it's like an egg: we'll just have to peel
that shell off her head and kiss her thataway!

Tereus

Let's go inside.

Peisetaerus

Lead the way, and good luck to us!

675

PARABASIS°

(Chorus, Chorus Leader)

Chorus

Ah darling warbler,
ah, dearest of birds,
songmate of all my hymns,
my nightingale companion,
you're here, you're here, you're manifest,
bringing sweet sound to me.
Now, weaver of springtime tunes
on the fair-toned pipes,
lead off our anapests.

680

676 The *parabasis* ("self-revelation") of the chorus is a standard feature of Old Comedy that allowed the poet, through speeches by the chorus-leader, to address, and also to admonish, the spectators about any issues he cared to raise, whether or not they were directly relevant to the issues raised in the rest of the play. The *parabasis* of *Birds* is unusual in that the Chorus Leader stays in dramatic character rather than speaking on the poet's behalf, and does not comment on any topic of current political or social interest. Instead, on the birds' behalf, he produces a systematic cosmogony in response to Peisetaerus' earlier revelation that they had once been all-powerful gods (the cosmogony is based mainly on Hesiod's *Theogony*, but with an admixture of other cosmogonic and pseudo-scientific poetry); and then he invites the spectators to taste the liberty and advantages associated with having wings.

The structure of this *parabasis* is (1) the *parabasis proper* (a speech by the Chorus Leader, often—as here—called "the anapests" after its characteristic rhythm), followed by (2) an "epirrhematic syzygy" consisting of an *ode* (a paired, or responsional, song) and an *epirrheme* (a paired, or responsional, speech) followed by their responsional *antode* and *antepirrheme*. The epirrhematic syzygy is so called because its *epirrhemes* are "yoked together" by songs in an ABAB pattern. *Birds*, like some of Aristophanes' other plays, has a second *parabasis* (lines 1058-1117) consisting only of the epirrhematic syzygy.

Chorus Leader

Ye men by nature just faintly alive, like the race of leaves, 685
 ye do-littles, artefacts of clay, tribes shadowy and feeble,
 ye wingless ephemerals, suffering mortals, dreamlike people:
 now pay ye attention to us, the immortals, the gods everlasting,
 the etherial, the ageless, whose counsels are imperishable;
 once you hear from us the truth about all celestial phenomena, 690
 and the true nature of birds, the genesis of gods, rivers, Erebus, and
 Chaos,°

then you'll be able to tell Prodicus from me to go to hell!°
 In the beginning were Chaos and Night and black Erebus and
 broad Tartarus,°
 no Earth, no Air nor Sky. But in the boundless bosom of Erebus
 did black-winged Night at the very start bring forth a wind-egg,° 695
 from which as the seasons revolved came forth Eros the seductive,
 like a swift-wheeling whirlwind, his back aglitter with wings of gold.
 And mating by night with winged Chaos in broad Tartarus,
 he hatched our very own race and first brought us up to the daylight.
 No race of immortal gods till Eros commingled everything; 700
 then, this commingling with that, Sky came to be, and Ocean
 and Earth, and the whole imperishable race of blessed gods.
 Thus *we're* far older than the blessed gods; it's abundantly clear
 that *we're* Eros' offspring: we fly and consort with lovers. Yes,
 many fair boys swear they won't, and almost make it to the end 705
 of their bloom, but thanks to *our* power their lovers do spread their
 thighs,

one presenting a quail, another a porphyryon, a goose, or a Persian
 bird.

And from us, the birds, do mortals get all their greatest blessings.
 To start with, we reveal the seasons of spring, winter, and autumn.
 It's time to sow when the crane whoops off to Africa; 710
 that's when it tells the shipowner to hang up his rudder and rest,
 and Orestes° to weave a cloak so he won't catch cold as he mugs you.
 And then it's the kite's turn to appear and reveal a new season,
 when it's time to shear the sheep's spring wool. And then there's the
 swallow,

691 Two of Hesiod's primeval entities ("Darkness" and "Void").

692 Prodicus of Ceos, a contemporary of Socrates with broad scientific and philosophical interests, traced the origin of gods to primitive nature- and hero-worship.

693 The darkest region of the underworld.

695 It was thought that some birds could be impregnated by the wind, producing unhatchable eggs.

712 The nickname of the son of one Timocrates, after the mythical hero who wandered insane to Athens after killing his own mother.

and now you ought to sell your coat and buy a jacket. 715
 And we're your Ammon,^o Delphi,^o Dodona,^o and Phoebus Apollo,
 for you embark on nothing without first consulting the birds,
 whether it's business, or making a living, or a man who's getting
 married.
 Whatever's decisive in prophecy you deem a bird:
 to you, an ominous word's a bird, a sneeze is a bird, 720
 a chance meeting, a sound, a good-luck servant, a donkey: all birds.
 So isn't it obvious that we're your prophetic Apollo?
 Well then, if you treat us as gods,
 you'll have your prophets, muses,
 breezes, seasons, winter, 725
 mild summer, stifling heat. And we won't run off
 and sit up there preening
 among the clouds, like Zeus,
 but ever at hand we'll bestow on you,
 your children, and your children's children 730
 healthy wealthiness,
 happiness, prosperity, peace,
 youth, hilarity, dances, festivities,
 and birds' milk. Why, you're liable
 to knock yourself out from good living, 735
 that's how rich you'll all be!

Chorus (strophe)

Bosky Muse—
 tio tio tio tio tinx!—
 of intricate tone, joining you
 mid the vales and mountain peaks,— 740
 tio tio tio tio tinx!—
 perched on a leaf-tressed ash,—
 tio tio tio tio tinx!—
 from my vibrant throat I pour forth
 sacred strains of song for Pan 745
 and holy dance tunes for the Mountain Mother^o—
 to to to to to to to tinx!—
 whence like a bee

716 See 619 n.

716 The chief oracular shrine of the Greeks, sacred to Phoebus Apollo, and also consulted by other peoples.

716 In Epirus, in NW Greece, where Zeus had an oracle.

746 Cybele, the Anatolian mother-goddess; both she and Pan (a god of wild mountains and forests) were worshipped at Athens.

Phrynichus^o ever sipped the nectar
 of ambrosial music 750
 to bring forth his sweet song—
 tio tio tio tinx!

Chorus Leader

Spectators, if any of you out there wants to sew up the rest
 of your life quite pleasantly with the birds, come here to us.
 Because whatever's shameful here, for people controlled by
 custom, 755
 it's all considered admirable among us birds.
 Is father-beating considered shameful by custom here?
 Up there it's perfectly admirable to rush your father,
 hit him, and say "Put up your spur if you mean to fight!"
 You happen to be a runaway slave with a branded forehead? 760
 With us you'll be simply be called a dappled francolin!
 You happen to be no less a Phrygian than Spintharus?^o
 Up here you'll be a pigeon of Philemon's^o breed!
 Even if you're a slave and a Carian like Execestides,^o
 join us, sprout some forefeathers, and presto, proper kinfolk! 765
 And if Peisias' son wants to betray the gates to the outlaws,
 let him become a partridge, a chick of the old cock, since among us
 there's nothing shameful in playing partridge tricks.^o

Chorus (antistrophe) ^o

Just so did swans—
 tio tio tio tinx!— 770
 beating wings in unison
 raise a harmonious whoop for Apollo—
 tio tio tio tinx!—
 gathered on the bank by Hebrus River—
 tio tio tio tinx! 775
 their whooping pierced the cloud of heaven;

749 The songs of this tragic poet, an older contemporary of Aeschylus, were still popular among the older generation of Athenians.

762 Phrygians at Athens would be slaves; the Spintharus teased here for foreign ancestry may be the father of the fourth-century statesman Eubulus.

763 Unknown; the point is that Athenians without family connections will be pedigreed birds.

764 See 11 n.

768 Peisias' son was perhaps the Cleombrotus elsewhere called "son of Partridge" (cf. 1292-93); "the outlaws" are probably those denounced in the sacrileges of 415, who had fled Athens and were condemned *in absentia*; "tricks" refers to the partridge's skill at evading pursuers.

768 This song probably recollects Apollo's journey from the Hyperboreans to Delphi in a swan-drawn chariot, which Alcaeus had described in a famous paean (fragment 307).

the manifold tribes of beasts were cowed,
and the cloudless clear air quenched the waves—
to to to to to to to to tinx!—

All Olympus reverberated, 780
amazement seized its lords, and the Olympian
Graces and Muses
replied in cheerful song—
tio tio tio tinx!

Chorus Leader

There's nothing better or merrier than sprouting wings. 785
Say one of you spectators had a pair of wings,
and got hungry, and grew bored with the tragic performances;
then *he'd* have flown out of here, gone home, had lunch,
and when he was full, flown back here again to see us.
And if some Patrocleides^o out there had to shit, 790
he wouldn't have fouled his cloak; no, *he'd* have flown off,
blown a fart, caught his breath, and flown right back again.
And if anyone out there happens to be an adulterer,
and sees the lady's husband in the Councillors' seats,^o
he'd have used his wings to launch himself out of here, 795
and gone and fucked her, and then flown back again.
So isn't getting wings worth any price?
Dietrephes,^o with only chianti-bottle wings,^o
was elected chief, then captain: starting from nothing,
then flying high, an actual zooming horsecock.^o 800

EPISODE

(*Peisetaerus, Euelpides, Chorus Leader, Xanthias, Manes*)

Peisetaerus

Ta da, here we are! My God, I can't recall
my ever having seen a funnier sight!

Euelpides

What are *you* laughing at?

790 The proposer of two decrees, otherwise unknown.

794 The 500 members of the Council had a block of reserved seats up front.

798 Despite his comic caricature as a distasteful arriviste, Dietrephes' family was in fact distinguished. In his current generalship he would command the Thracians responsible for the massacre at Mycalessus described by Thucydides 7.29-30, and later he would later become an oligarch (8.64).

798 As the wicker handles were called.

800 A mythical beast often depicted by Attic painters of the 6th and early 5th c. and mentioned by Aeschylus in his lost play, *Myrmidons* (fragment 134), used of strutting officers.

Peisetaerus

Those wing-feathers of yours.

Do you know what you look just like in those wings?

A painting of a goose made for the thriftshop!

805

Euelpides

And you look like a blackbird with a bowl cut!

Peisetaerus

As Aeschylus said, we're stuck with these comparisons

"not at others' hands but by our very own feathers."⁸⁰

Chorus Leader

Now, what's on our agenda?

Peisetaerus

First, we should give

our city a name, something grand and notable;

then sacrifice to the gods.

810

Euelpides

My sentiments exactly.

Chorus Leader

Let's see then, what name will our city have?

Peisetaerus

What do you say we give it that impressive name

from Lacedaemonia, Sparta?

Euelpides

Great Heracles,

do you think I'd stick *my* city with a name like Sparta?⁸¹

815

Not even for a mattress⁸²—if I had nice wide slats instead.

Peisetaerus

Then what name *will* we give it?

Chorus Leader

A name suggesting

all this, the clouds and aerial spaces; something

very highfalutin.

Peisetaerus

How about Cloudcuckooland?

807 *Myrmidons* fragment 139, where Achilles, blaming himself for Patroclus' death, recalls an eagle shot by an arrow fletched with eagle feathers.

815 Sparta was Athens' main antagonist in the Peloponnesian War.

816 Punning on "esparto" twine.

Chorus Leader

Yes, yes!

You've found an absolutely great and wonderful name! 820

Euelpides

Sure, this must be the same Cloudeuckooland
 where most of Theogenes'° assets are,
 and all of Aeschines'°.

Peisetaerus

No, even better than that:
 it's the Plain of Phlegra, where the very Gods
 outshot the Children of Earth at empty bragging!° 825

Chorus Leader

A gleaming° great city! Now what god shall be
 the Citadel Guardian? For whom shall we weave the Robe?°

Peisetaerus

Why not let Athena Polias have the job?

Euelpides

But how can a city remain well disciplined,
 where a god born a woman stands there wearing armor, 830
 while a Cleisthenes° sits there with a sewing kit?

Chorus LeaderThen who *will* be taking charge of the city's Storkade?°**Peisetaerus**

One of our birds, a bird of the Persian breed,°
 the one universally known as a very fearsome
 Chick of Ares.

Euelpides

My Lord and Master Chick! 835
 And that's a god so well suited to life on the rocks.

Peisetaerus

Come on now, Euelpides, you take off for the sky

821 A common name, here perhaps the Theogenes ridiculed elsewhere for imaginary wealth.

822 Ridiculed as a boaster elsewhere.

825 See 553 n.

826 A favorite epithet of Athens.

827 Athena Polias ("of the Citadel") was Citadel Guardian of Athens, and every four years was presented with a robe at the festival of the Great Panathenaea.

831 Often ridiculed as a beardless effeminate.

832 The *Pelargikon* (~ *pelargos* "stork"), designated the Mycenaean walls of the Acropolis and an enclosure at its foot.

833 See 483-84.

and make yourself useful to the builders of our walls:
 take them up gravel, roll up your sleeves and mix some mortar,
 hand up a trough, fall off the scaffolding, 840
 station site watchmen, keep the embers glowing,
 run a tour with the bell, and bed down right on site.
 Now send one herald up to the gods above,
 and another herald down to mankind below,
 and then report to me.

Euelpides

And you can stay 845
 and report to me—in hell!

Peisetaerus

Friend, do as I say;
 none of what I've talked about can be done without you.
 As for me, I'd better sacrifice to the new gods,
 so I'll invite the priest to organize the procession.
 Slave! Slave! Pick up the basket and the holy water. 850

Chorus (strophe)

I am with you, I concur,
 I hereby endorse your advice
 to approach the gods
 with grand and solemn hymns
 as we curry their favor as well 855
 by sacrificing a wee sheep.
 Up up up with a Pythian cry,
 and let Chaeris pipe as we sing.^o

EPISODE

(*Peisetaerus, Priest*)

Peisetaerus

Now stop that piping! Heracles, what is this?
 By god, I've seen a lot of amazing sights, 860
 but this I've never seen, a raven playing the pipes!
 Well, Priest, you're on; start sacrificing to the new gods.

Priest

I certainly will, but where's the boy with the basket? 863
 All pray:^o to Hestia of the Birds, to Kite their Hearthkeeper, to the
 Olympian birds and birdesses each and all—

858 A lyre player and piper often ridiculed in comedy for poor technique.

864 The Priest's invocations in lines 864-88 are in prose.

Peisetaerus

Hail, Hawk of Sunium,^o Lord of the Seastork! 865

Priest

and the Swan of Pytho and Delos,^o and Leto the Quail Mother,^o and
Artemis the Curlew—

Peisetaerus

No more Colaenis,^o now it's Artemis Curlew! 872

Priest

and Pigeon Sabazius,^o and the Great Ostrich Mother of gods and
men^o—

Peisetaerus

Lady Cybele the Ostrich, mother of Cleocritus!^o 876

Priest

grant to the inhabitants of Clouducuckooland health and security, and
for the Chians as well—^o

Peisetaerus

It's funny how the Chians get tacked on everywhere! 880

Priest

and the Avian heroes and the Heroes' children, Porphyryon and White
Pelican and Grey Pelican and Red Hawk and Grouse and Peacock
and Reed Warbler and Teal and Harrier and Heron and Tern and
Black Tit and Blue Tit— 888

Peisetaerus

Stop, damn you, stop your invitations! Whew!
How big do you think this victim is, you jinx, 890
that you're inviting eagles and vultures to share?
A single kite could snatch the whole thing away.
Now get out of here, and take your wreaths with you!
I'll perform this sacrifice here all by myself.

Chorus (antistrophe)

Then once more in your service 895
I will raise a second song,
godfearing and pious,

865 A promontory on the SE tip of Attica, where Poseidon had a temple.

866 The sacred bird of Apollo.

866 I.e. the corncrake, alluding to Ortygia (Quail Island), where Leto gave birth to Artemis.

872 Artemis' cult title in the Attic deme Myrrhinus.

873 A Phrygian god associated with Dionysus and popular with women and slaves.

873 Like Cybele, the Great Mother, the Great Ostrich (now extinct) was from Asia.

876 Not certainly identifiable.

877 In the Athenian empire Chios and Methymna enjoyed the special status of autonomous allies.

ily cere- cahiers is a collection of texts (fragments). it is a branch of the collective *it is part of an ensemble*. these texts function as starting points for dialogues within our practice. we also love to share them with guests and visitors of our projects.

the first copy of *ily cere- cahier 47* was printed in september 2026

1	the artist as producer in times of crisis	okwui enwezor
2	the carrier bag theory of fiction	ursula k. le guin
3	arts of noticing	anna lowenhaupt tsing
4	whatever & bartleby	giorgio agamben
5	notes toward a politics of location	adrienne rich
6	the intimacy of strangers	merlin sheldrake
7	the zero world	achille mbembe
8	why do we say that cows don't do anything?	vinciane despret
9	nautonomat operating manual	raqs media collective
10	on plants, or the origin of our world	emanuele cocchia
11	hydrofeminism: or, on becoming a body of water	astrida neimanis
12	the gift and the given	eduardo viveiros de castro
13	the three figures of geontology	elizabeth a. povinelli
14	what lies beneath	george monbiot
15	sculpture not to be seen	elena filipovic
16	the onion	kurt schwitters
17	tentacular thinking	donna j. haraway
18	toward a symbiotic way of thought	vincent zonca
19	living with birds	len howard
20	why look at animals?	john berger
21	quantum listening	pauline Oliveros
22	politics of installation	boris groys
23	some notes on drawing	amy sillman
24	depiction, object, event	jeff wall
25	cyber-teratologies	rosi braidotti
26	love your monsters	bruno latour
27	arts of living on a damaged planet	multiple authors
28	what is it like to be a bat?	thomas nagel
29	dazzling diversity: the biology of chiroptera	tessa laird
30	what is an owl?	stephen moss
31	the gender of sound	anne carson
32	the euphio question	kurt vonnegut
33	listening to the tree of life	karen bakker
34	organic music societies	multiple authors
35	klittenbandjes	hay wijnhoven
36	a fable for tomorrow	rachel carson
37	listening music	john maus
38	wolf trilogy	angela carter
39	over leven	sander turnhout
40	hele dagen tussen levende wezens	estelle zhong mengual
41	the earthly community	achille mbembe
42	riding the blinds	maggie nelson
43	notes on gesture	giorgio agamben
44	the living mountain	nan shepherd
45	the ecological crisis as a crisis of sensibility	baptiste morizot
46	death of a moth	virginia woolf
47	the birds	aristophanes
48	anthropomorphism, anthropectomy and anthropocentrism	susana monsó
49	pretenders	matthew gandy
50	finding the mother tree	suzanne simard

