

ARISTOPHANES

THE BIRDS

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The Birds

by Aristophanes





The Birds by Aristophanes

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Contents

Introduction

Dramatis Personæ

The Play

Introduction

The Birds differs markedly from all the other comedies of Aristophanes which have come down to us in subject and general conception. It is just an extravaganza pure and simple—a graceful, whimsical theme chosen expressly for the sake of the opportunities it afforded of bright, amusing dialogue, pleasing lyrical interludes, and charming displays of brilliant stage effects and pretty dresses. Unlike other plays of the same author, there is here apparently no serious political *motif* underlying the surface burlesque and buffoonery.

Some critics, it is true, profess to find in it a reference to the unfortunate Sicilian Expedition, then in progress, and a prophecy of its failure and the political downfall of Alcibiades. But as a matter of fact, the whole thing seems rather an attempt on the dramatist's part to relieve the overwrought minds of his fellow-citizens, anxious and discouraged at the unsatisfactory reports from before Syracuse, by a work conceived in a lighter vein than usual and mainly unconnected with contemporary realities. The play was produced in the year 414 B.C., just when success or failure in Sicily hung in the balance, though already the outlook was gloomy, and many circumstances pointed to impending disaster. Moreover, the public conscience was still shocked and perturbed over the mysterious affair of the mutilation of the Hermæ, which had occurred immediately before the sailing of the fleet, and strongly suspicious of Alcibiades' participation in the outrage. In spite of the inherent charm of the subject, the splendid outbursts of lyrical poetry in some of the choruses and the beauty of the scenery and costumes, *The Birds* failed to win the first prize. This was acclaimed to a play of Aristophanes' rival, Amipsias, the title of which, *The Comastæ*, or *Revellers*, "seems to imply that the chief interest was derived from direct allusions to the outrage above mentioned and to the individuals suspected to have been engaged in it."

For this reason, which militated against its immediate success, viz. the absence of direct allusion to contemporary politics—there are, of course, incidental references here and there to topics and personages of the day—the play appeals perhaps more than any other of our author's productions to the modern reader. Sparkling wit, whimsical fancy, poetic charm, are of all ages, and can be appreciated as readily by ourselves as by an Athenian audience of two thousand years ago, though, of course, much is inevitably lost "without the important adjuncts of music, scenery, dresses and what we may call 'spectacle' generally, which we know in this instance to have been on the most magnificent scale."

The plot is this. Euelpides and Pisthetærus, two old Athenians, disgusted with the litigiousness, wrangling and sycophancy of their countrymen, resolve upon quitting Attica. Having heard of the fame of Epops (the hoopoe), sometime called Tereus, and now King of the Birds, they determine, under the direction of a raven and a jackdaw, to seek from him and his subject birds a city free from all care and strife." Arrived at the Palace of Epops, they knock, and Trochilus (the wren), in a state of great flutter, as he mistakes them for fowlers, opens the door and informs them that his Majesty is asleep. When he awakes, the strangers appear before him, and after listening to a long and eloquent harangue on the superior attractions of a residence among the birds, they propose a notable scheme of their own to further enhance its advantages and definitely secure the sovereignty of the universe now exercised by the gods of Olympus.

The birds are summoned to meet in general council. They come flying up from all quarters of the heavens, and after a brief mis- understanding, during which they come near tearing the two human envoys to pieces, they listen to the exposition of the latter's plan. This is nothing

less than the building of a new city, to be called Nephelococcygia, or 'Cloud-cuckoo-town,' between earth and heaven, to be garrisoned and guarded by the birds in such a way as to intercept all communication of the gods with their worshippers on earth. All steam of sacrifice will be prevented from rising to Olympus, and the Immortals will very soon be starved into an acceptance of any terms proposed. The new Utopia is duly constructed, and the daring plan to secure the sovereignty is in a fair way to succeed. Meantime various quacks and charlatans, each with a special scheme for improving things, arrive from earth, and are one after the other exposed and dismissed. Presently arrives Prometheus, who informs Epops of the desperate straits to which the gods are by this time reduced, and advises him to push his claims and demand the hand of Basileia (Dominion), the handmaid of Zeus. Next an embassy from the Olympians appears on the scene, consisting of Heracles, Posidon and a god from the savage regions of the Triballians. After some disputation, it is agreed that all reasonable demands of the birds are to be granted, while Pisthetærus is to have Basileia as his bride. The comedy winds up with the *epithalamium* in honour of the nuptials.

Dramatis Personæ

Euelpides

Pisthetærus

Epops (the Hoopoe)

Trochilus, Servant to Epops

Phænicopterus

Heralds

A Priest

A Poet

A Prophet

Meton, a Geometrician

A Commissioner

A Dealer in Decrees

Iris

A Parricide

Cinesias, a Dithyrambic Bard

An Informer

Prometheus

Posidon

Triballus

Heracles

Slaves of Pisthetærus

Messengers

Chorus of Birds

The Play

Scene: A wild, desolate tract of open country; broken rocks and brushwood occupy the centre of the stage.

Euelpides (to his Jay)¹

Do you think I should walk straight for yon tree?

Pisthetærus (to his Crow)

Cursed beast, what are you croaking to me?...to retrace my steps?

Euelpides

Why, you wretch, we are wandering at random, we are exerting ourselves only to return to the same spot; 'tis labour lost.

Pisthetærus

To think that I should trust to this crow, which has made me cover more than a thousand furlongs!

Euelpides

And that I to this jay, which has torn every nail from my fingers!

Pisthetærus

If only I knew where we were....

Euelpides

Could you find your country again from here?

Pisthetærus

No, I feel quite sure I could not, any more than could Excecestides² find his.

Euelpides

Oh dear! oh dear!

Pisthetærus

Aye, aye, my friend, 'tis indeed the road of "oh dears" we are following.

Euelpides

That Philocrates, the bird-seller, played us a scurvy trick, when he pretended these two guides could help us to find Tereus³, the Epops, who is a bird, without being born of one. He has indeed sold us this jay, a true son of Tharelides,⁴ for an *obolus*, and this crow for three, but what can they do? Why, nothing whatever but bite and scratch! —What's the matter with you

¹ Euelpides is holding a jay and Pisthetærus a crow; they are the guides who are to lead them to the kingdom of the birds.

² A stranger who wanted to pass as an Athenian, although coming originally for a far-away barbarian country.

³ A king of Thrace, a son of Ares, who married Procne, the daughter of Pandion, King of Athens, whom he had assisted against the Megarians. He violated his sister-in-law, Philomela, and then cut out her tongue; she nevertheless managed to convey to her sister how she had been treated. They both agreed to kill Itys, whom Procne had borne to Tereus, and dished up the limbs of his own son to the father; at the end of the meal Philomela appeared and threw the child's head upon the table. Tereus rushed with drawn sword upon the princesses, but all the actors in this terrible scene were metamorph[o]sed. Tereus became an Epops (hoopoe), Procne a swallow, Philomela a nightingale, and Itys a goldfinch. According to Anacreon and Apollodorus it was Procne who became the nightingale and Philomela the swallow, and this is the version of the tradition followed by Aristophanes.

⁴ An Athenian who had some resemblance to a jay—so says the scholiast, at any rate.

then, that you keep opening your beak? Do you want us to fling ourselves headlong down these rocks? There is no road that way.

Pisthetærus

Not even the vestige of a track in any direction.

Euelpides

And what does the crow say about the road to follow?

Pisthetærus

By Zeus, it no longer croaks the same thing it did.

Euelpides

And which way does it tell us to go now?

Pisthetærus

It says that, by dint of gnawing, it will devour my fingers.

Euelpides

What misfortune is ours! we strain every nerve to get to the birds,⁵ do everything we can to that end, and we cannot find our way! Yes, spectators, our madness is quite different from that of Sacas. He is not a citizen, and would fain be one at any cost; we, on the contrary, born of an honourable tribe and family and living in the midst of our fellow-citizens, we have fled from our country as hard as ever we could go. 'Tis not that we hate it; we recognize it to be great and rich, likewise that everyone has the right to ruin himself; but the crickets only chirrup among the fig-trees for a month or two, whereas the Athenians spend their whole lives in chanting forth judgments from their law-courts.⁶ That is why we started off with a basket, a stew-pot and some myrtle boughs⁷ and have come to seek a quiet country in which to settle. We are going to Tereus, the Epops, to learn from him, whether, in his aerial flights, he has noticed some town of this kind.

Pisthetærus

Here! look!

Euelpides

What's the matter?

Pisthetærus

Why, the crow has been pointing me to something up there for some time now.

Euelpides

And the jay is also opening its beak and craning its neck to show me I know not what. Clearly, there are some birds about here. We shall soon know, if we kick up a noise to start them.

Pisthetærus

Do you know what to do? Knock your leg against this rock.

Euelpides

And you your head to double the noise.

Pisthetærus

Well then use a stone instead; take one and hammer with it.

⁵ Literally, 'to go to the crows,' a proverbial expression equivalent to our 'going to the devil.'

⁶ They leave Athens because of their hatred of lawsuits and informers; this is the especial failing of the Athenians satirized in *The Wasps*.

⁷ Myrtle boughs were used in sacrifices, and the founding of every colony was started by a sacrifice.

Euelpides

Good idea! Ho there, within! Slave! slave!

Pisthetærus

What's that, friend! You say, "slave," to summon Epopos! It would be much better to shout, "Epopos, Epopos!"

Euelpides

Well then, Epopos! Must I knock again? Epopos!

Trochilus

Who's there? Who calls my master?

Pisthetærus

Apollo the Deliverer! what an enormous beak!⁸

Trochilus

Good god! they are bird-catchers.

Euelpides

The mere sight of him petrifies me with terror. What a horrible monster.

Trochilus

Woe to you!

Euelpides

But we are not men.

Trochilus

What are you, then?

Euelpides

I am the Fearling, an African bird.

Trochilus

You talk nonsense.

Euelpides

Well, then, just ask it of my feet.⁹

Trochilus

And this other one, what bird is it?

Pisthetærus

I? I am a Cackling,¹⁰ from the land of the pheasants.

Euelpides

But you yourself, in the name of the gods! what animal are you?

Trochilus

Why, I am a slave-bird.

Euelpides

Why, have you been conquered by a cock?

⁸ The actors wore masks made to resemble the birds they were supposed to represent.

⁹ Fear had had disastrous effects upon Euelpides' internal economy, and this his feet evidenced.

¹⁰ The same mishap had occurred to Pisthetærus.

Trochilus

No, but when my master was turned into a peewit, he begged me to become a bird too, to follow and to serve him.

Euelpides

Does a bird need a servant, then?

Trochilus

'Tis no doubt because he was a man. At times he wants to eat a dish of loach from Phalerum; I seize my dish and fly to fetch him some. Again he wants some pea-soup; I seize a ladle and a pot and run to get it.

Euelpides

This is, then, truly a running-bird.¹¹ Come, Trochilus, do us the kindness to call your master.

Trochilus

Why, he has just fallen asleep after a feed of myrtle-berries and a few grubs.

Euelpides

Never mind; wake him up.

Trochilus

I am certain he will be angry. However, I will wake him to please you.

Pisthetærus

You cursed brute! why, I am almost dead with terror!

Euelpides

Oh! my god! 'twas sheer fear that made me lose my jay.

Pisthetærus

Ah! you great coward! were you so frightened that you let go your jay?

Euelpides

And did you not lose your crow, when you fell sprawling on the ground? Pray tell me that.

Pisthetærus

No, no.

Euelpides

Where is it, then?

Pisthetærus

It has flown away.

Euelpides

Then you did not let it go? Oh! you brave fellow!

Epops

Open the forest,¹² that I may go out!

Euelpides

By Heracles! what a creature! what plumage! What means this triple crest?

Epops

Who wants me?

¹¹ The Greek word for a wren is derived from the same root as 'to run.'

¹² No doubt there was some scenery to represent a forest. Besides, there is a pun intended. The words answering for 'forests' and 'door' in Greek only differ slightly in sound.

Euelpides

The twelve great gods have used you ill, meseems.

Epops

Are you chaffing me about my feathers? I have been a man, strangers.

Euelpides

'Tis not you we are jeering at.

Epops

At what, then?

Euelpides

Why, 'tis your beak that looks so odd to us.

Epops

This is how Sophocles outrages me in his tragedies. Know, I once was Tereus.¹³

Euelpides

You were Tereus, and what are you now? a bird or a peacock?¹⁴

Epops

I am a bird.

Euelpides

Then where are your feathers? For I don't see them.

Epops

They have fallen off.

Euelpides

Through illness?

Epops

No. All birds moult their feathers, you know, every winter, and others grow in their place. But tell me, who are you?

Euelpides

We? We are mortals.

Epops

From what country?

Euelpides

From the land of the beautiful galleys.¹⁵

Epops

Are you dicasts?¹⁶

Euelpides

No, if anything, we are anti-dicasts.

¹³ Sophocles had written a tragedy about Tereus, in which, no doubt, the king finally appears as a hoopoe.

¹⁴ One would expect the question to be "bird or man." —Are you a peacock? The hoopoe resembles the peacock inasmuch as both have crests.

¹⁵ Athens.

¹⁶ The Athenians were madly addicted to lawsuits. (See *The Wasps*.)

Epops

Is that kind of seed sown among you?¹⁷

Euelpides

You have to look hard to find even a little in our fields.

Epops

What brings you here?

Euelpides

We wish to pay you a visit.

Epops

What for?

Euelpides

Because you formerly were a man, like we are, formerly you had debts, as we have, formerly you did not want to pay them, like ourselves; furthermore, being turned into a bird, you have when flying seen all lands and seas. Thus you have all human knowledge as well as that of birds. And hence we have come to you to beg you to direct us to some cosy town, in which one can repose as if on thick coverlets.

Epops

And are you looking for a greater city than Athens?

Euelpides

No, not a greater, but one more pleasant to dwell in.

Epops

Then you are looking for an aristocratic country.

Euelpides

I? Not at all! I hold the son of Scellias in horror.¹⁸

Epops

But, after all, what sort of city would please you best?

Euelpides

A place where the following would be the most important business transacted. —Some friend would come knocking at the door quite early in the morning saying, "By Olympian Zeus, be at my house early, as soon as you have bathed, and bring your children too. I am giving a nuptial feast, so don't fail, or else don't cross my threshold when I am in distress."

Epops

Ah! that's what may be called being fond of hardships! And what say you?

Pisthetærus

My tastes are similar.

Epops

And they are?

Pisthetærus

I want a town where the father of a handsome lad will stop in the street and say to me reproachfully as if I had failed him, "Ah! Is this well done, Stilbonides! You met my son coming from the bath after the gymnasium and you neither spoke to him, nor embraced him,

¹⁷ As much as to say, 'Then you have such things as anti-dicasts?' And Euelpides practically replaces, 'Very few.'

¹⁸ His name was Aristocrates; he was a general and commanded a fleet sent in aid of Coreyra.

nor took him with you, nor ever once twitched his parts. Would anyone call you an old friend of mine?"

Epos

Ah! wag, I see you are fond of suffering. But there is a city of delights, such as you want. 'Tis on the Red Sea.

Euelpides

Oh, no. Not a sea-port, where some fine morning the Salaminian¹⁹ galley can appear, bringing a writ-server along. Have you no Greek town you can propose to us?

Epos

Why not choose Lepreum in Elis for your settlement?

Euelpides

By Zeus! I could not look at Lepreum without disgust, because of Melanthius.²⁰

Epos

Then, again, there is the Opuntian, where you could live.

Euelpides

I would not be Opuntian²¹ for a talent. But come, what is it like to live with the birds? You should know pretty well.

Epos

Why, 'tis not a disagreeable life. In the first place, one has no purse.

Euelpides

That does away with much roguery.

Epos

For food the gardens yield us white sesame, myrtle-berries, poppies and mint.

Euelpides

Why, 'tis the life of the newly-wed indeed.²²

Pisthetærus

Ha! I am beginning to see a great plan, which will transfer the supreme power to the birds, if you will but take my advice.

Epos

Take your advice? In what way?

Pisthetærus

In what way? Well, firstly, do not fly in all directions with open beak; it is not dignified. Among us, when we see a thoughtless man, we ask, "What sort of bird is this?" and Teleas answers, "'Tis a man who has no brain, a bird that has lost his head, a creature you cannot catch, for it never remains in any one place."

Epos

By Zeus himself! your jest hits the mark. What then is to be done?

¹⁹ The State galley, which carried the officials of the Athenian republic to their several departments and brought back those whose time had expired; it was this galley that was sent to Sicily to fetch back Alcibiades, who was accused of sacrilege.

²⁰ A tragic poet, who was a leper; there is a play, of course, on the word Lepreum.

²¹ An allusion to Opuntius, who was one-eyed.

²² The newly-married ate a sesame-cake, decorated with garlands of myrtle, poppies and mint.

Pisthetærus

Found a city.

Epops

We birds? But what sort of city should we build?

Pisthetærus

Oh, really, really! 'tis spoken like a fool! Look down.

Epops

I am looking.

Pisthetærus

Now look upwards.

Epops

I am looking.

Pisthetærus

Turn your head round.

Epops

Ah! 'twill be pleasant for me, if I end in twisting my neck!

Pisthetærus

What have you seen?

Epops

The clouds and the sky.

Pisthetærus

Very well! is not this the pole of the birds then?

Epops

How their pole?

Pisthetærus

Or, if you like it, the land. And since it turns and passes through the whole universe, it is called, 'pole.'²³ If you build and fortify it, you will turn your pole into a fortified city.²⁴ In this way you will reign over mankind as you do over the grasshoppers and cause the gods to die of rabid hunger

Epops

How so?

Pisthetærus

The air is 'twixt earth and heaven. When we want to go to Delphi, we ask the Bœotians²⁵ for leave of passage; in the same way, when men sacrifice to the gods, unless the latter pay you tribute, you exercise the right of every nation towards strangers and don't allow the smoke of the sacrifices to pass through your city and territory.

Epops

By earth! by snares! by network!²⁶ I never heard of anything more cleverly conceived; and, if the other birds approve, I am going to build the city along with you.

²³ From [the word meaning] 'to turn.'

²⁴ The Greek words for 'pole' and 'city' only differ by a single letter.

²⁵ Bœotia separated Attica from Phocis.

²⁶ He swears by the powers that are to him dreadful.

Pisthetærus

Who will explain the matter to them?

Eops

You must yourself. Before I came they were quite ignorant, but since I have lived with them I have taught them to speak.

Pisthetærus

But how can they be gathered together?

Eops

Easily. I will hasten down to the coppice to waken my dear Procne!²⁷ as soon as they hear our voices, they will come to us hot wing.

Pisthetærus

My dear bird, lose no time, I beg. Fly at once into the coppice and awaken Procne.

Eops

Chase off drowsy sleep, dear companion. Let the sacred hymn gush from thy divine throat in melodious strains; roll forth in soft cadence your refreshing melodies to bewail the fate of Itys,²⁸ which has been the cause of so many tears to us both. Your pure notes rise through the thick leaves of the yew-tree right up to the throne of Zeus, where Phoebus listens to you, Phoebus with his golden hair. And his ivory lyre responds to your plaintive accents; he gathers the choir of the gods and from their immortal lips rushes a sacred chant of blessed voices. (*The flute is played behind the scene.*)

Pisthetærus

Oh! by Zeus! what a throat that little bird possesses. He has filled the whole coppice with honey-sweet melody!

Euelpides

Hush!

Pisthetærus

What's the matter?

Euelpides

Will you keep silence?

Pisthetærus

What for?

Euelpides

Eops is going to sing again.

Eops (in the coppice)

Epopoi poi popoi, epopoi, popoi, here, here, quick, quick, quick, my comrades in the air; all you who pillage the fertile lands of the husbandmen, the numberless tribes who gather and devour the barley seeds, the swift flying race who sing so sweetly. And you whose gentle twitter resounds through the fields with the little cry of *tio, tio, tio, tio, tio, tio, tio, tio*; and you who hop about the branches of the ivy in the gardens; the mountain birds, who feed on the wild olive berries or the arbutus, hurry to come at my call, *triot, trioto, totobrix*; you also, who snap up the sharp-stinging gnats in the marshy vales, and you who dwell in the fine

²⁷ As already stated, according to the legend accepted by Aristophanes, it was Procne who was turned into the nightengale.

²⁸ The son of Tereus and Procne.

plain of Marathon, all damp with dew, and you, the francolin with speckled wings; you too, the halcyons, who flit over the swelling waves of the sea, come hither to hear the tidings; let all the tribes of long-necked birds assemble here; know that a clever old man has come to us, bringing an entirely new idea and proposing great reforms. Let all come to the debate here, here, here, here. *Torotorotorotorotix, kikkobau, kikkobau, torotorotorotorolililix.*

Pisthetærus

Can you see any bird?

Euelpides

By Phoebus, no! and yet I am straining my eyesight to scan the sky.

Pisthetærus

'Twas really not worth Epops' while to go and bury himself in the thicket like a plover when a-hatching.

Phænicopterus

Torotina, torotina.

Pisthetærus

Hold, friend, here is another bird.

Euelpides

I' faith, yes, 'tis a bird, but of what kind? Isn't it a peacock?

Pisthetærus

Epops will tell us. What is this bird?

Epops

'Tis not one of those you are used to seeing; 'tis a bird from the marshes.

Pisthetærus

Oh! oh! but he is very handsome with his wings as crimson as flame.

Epops

Undoubtedly; indeed he is called flamingo.²⁹

Euelpides

Hi! I say! You!

Pisthetærus

What are you shouting for?

Euelpides

Why, here's another bird.

Pisthetærus

Aye, indeed; 'tis a foreign bird too. What is this bird from beyond the mountains with a look as solemn as it is stupid?

Epops

He is called the Mede.³⁰

²⁹ An African bird, that comes to the southern countries of Europe, to Greece, Italy, and Spain; it is even seen in Provence.

³⁰ Aristophanes amusingly mixes up real birds with people and individuals, whom he represents in the form of birds; he is personifying the Medians here.

Pisthetærus

The Mede! But, by Heracles, how, if a Mede, has he flown here without a camel?

Euelpides

Here's another bird with a crest.

Pisthetærus

Ah! that's curious. I say, Epops, you are not the only one of your kind then?

Epops

This bird is the son of Philocles, who is the son of Epops;³¹ so that, you see, I am his grandfather; just as one might say, Hipponicus,³² the son of Callias, who is the son of Hipponicus.

Pisthetærus

Then this bird is Callias! Why, what a lot of his feathers he has lost!³³

Epops

That's because he is honest; so the informers set upon him and the women too pluck out his feathers.

Pisthetærus

By Posidon, do you see that many-coloured bird? What is his name?

Epops

This one? 'Tis the glutton.

Pisthetærus

Is there another glutton besides Cleonymus? But why, if he is Cleonymus, has he not thrown away his crest?³⁴ But what is the meaning of all these crests? Have these birds come to contend for the double stadium prize³⁵?

Epops

They are like the Carians, who cling to the crests of their mountains for greater safety.³⁶

Pisthetærus

Oh, Posidon! do you see what swarms of birds are gathering here?

Euelpides

By Phoebus! what a cloud! The entrance to the stage is no longer visible, so closely do they fly together.

Pisthetærus

Here is the partridge.

Euelpides

Faith! there is the francolin.

³¹ Philocles, a tragic poet, had written a tragedy on Tereus, which was simply a plagiarism of the play of the same name by Sophocles. Philocles is the son of Epops, because he got his inspiration from Sophocles' Tereus, and at the same time is father to Epops, since he himself produced another Tereus.

³² This Hipponicus is probably the orator whose ears Alcibiades boxed to gain a bet; he was a descendant of Callias, who was famous for his hatred of Pisistratus.

³³ This Callias, who must not be confounded with the foe of Pisistratus, had ruined himself.

³⁴ Cleonymus had cast away his shield; he was as great a glutton as he was a coward.

³⁵ A race in which the track had to be circled twice.

³⁶ A people of Asia Minor; when pursued by the Ionians they took refuge in the mountains.

Pisthetærus

There is the poachard.

Euelpides

Here is the kingfisher. And over yonder?

Epops

'Tis the barber.

Euelpides

What? a bird a barber?

Pisthetærus

Why, Sporgilus is one.³⁷ Here comes the owl.

Euelpides

And who is it brings an owl to Athens?³⁸

Pisthetærus

Here is the magpie, the turtle-dove, the swallow, the horned owl, the buzzard, the pigeon, the falcon, the ring-dove, the cuckoo, the red-foot, the red-cap, the purple-cap, the kestrel, the diver, the ousel, the osprey, the woodpecker.

Euelpides

Oh! oh! what a lot of birds! what a quantity of blackbirds! how they scold, how they come rushing up! What a noise! what a noise! Can they be bearing us ill-will? Oh! there! there! they are opening their beaks and staring at us.

Pisthetærus

Why, so they are.

Chorus

Popopopopopopoi. Where is he who called me? Where am I to find him?

Epops

I have been waiting for you this long while! I never fail in my word to my friends.

Chorus

Tititititititi. What good thing have you to tell me?

Epops

Something that concerns our common safety, and that is just as pleasant as it is to the purpose. Two men, who are subtle reasoners, have come here to seek me.

Chorus

Where? What? What are you saying?

Epops

I say, two old men have come from the abode of men to propose a vast and splendid scheme to us.

Chorus

Oh! 'tis a horrible, unheard-of crime! What are you saying?

³⁷ An Athenian barber.

³⁸ The owl was dedicated to Athene, and being respected at Athens, it had greatly multiplied. Hence the proverb, 'taking owls to Athens,' similar to our English 'taking coals to Newcastle.'

Eops

Nay! never let my words scare you.

Chorus

What have you done then?

Eops

I have welcomed two men, who wish to live with us.

Chorus

And you have dared to do that!

Eops

Aye, and am delighted at having done so.

Chorus

Where are they?

Eops

In your midst, as I am.

Chorus

Ah! ah! we are betrayed; 'tis sacrilege! Our friend, he who picked up corn-seeds in the same plains as ourselves, has violated our ancient laws; he has broken the oaths that bind all birds; he has laid a snare for me, he has handed us over to the attacks of that impious race which, throughout all time, has never ceased to war against us. As for this traitorous bird, we will decide his case later, but the two old men shall be punished forthwith; we are going to tear them to pieces.

Pisthetærus

'Tis all over with us.

Euelpides

You are the sole cause of all our trouble. Why did you bring me from down yonder?

Pisthetærus

To have you with me.

Euelpides

Say rather to have me melt into tears.

Pisthetærus

Go to! you are talking nonsense.

Euelpides

How so?

Pisthetærus

How will you be able to cry when once your eyes are pecked out?

Chorus

Io! io! forward to the attack, throw yourselves upon the foe, spill his blood; take to your wings and surround them on all sides. Woe to them! let us get to work with our beaks, let us devour them. Nothing can save them from our wrath, neither the mountain forests, nor the clouds that float in the sky, nor the foaming deep. Come, peck, tear to ribbons. Where is the chief of the cohort? Let him engage the right wing.

Euelpides

This is the fatal moment. Where shall I fly to, unfortunate wretch that I am?

Pisthetærus

Stay! stop here!

Euelpides

That they may tear me to pieces?

Pisthetærus

And how do you think to escape them?

Euelpides

I don't know at all.

Pisthetærus

Come, I will tell you. We must stop and fight them. Let us arm ourselves with these stew-pots.

Euelpides

Why with the stew-pots?

Pisthetærus

The owl will not attack us.³⁹

Euelpides

But do you see all those hooked claws?

Pisthetærus

Seize the spit and pierce the foe on your side.

Euelpides

And how about my eyes?

Pisthetærus

Protect them with this dish or this vinegar-pot.

Euelpides

Oh! what cleverness! what inventive genius! You are a great general, even greater than Nicias,⁴⁰ where stratagem is concerned.

Chorus

Forward, forward, charge with your beaks! Come, no delay. Tear, pluck, strike, flay them, and first of all smash the stew-pot.

Epops

Oh, most cruel of all animals, why tear these two men to pieces, why kill them? What have they done to you? They belong to the same tribe, to the same family as my wife.⁴¹

Chorus

Are wolves to be spared? Are they not our most mortal foes? So let us punish them.

³⁹ An allusion to the Feast of Pots; it was kept at Athens on the third day of the Anthesteria, when all sorts of vegetables were stewed together and offered for the dead to Bacchus and Athene. This Feast was peculiar to Athens. —Hence Pisthetærus thinks that the owl will recognize they are Athenians by seeing the stew-pots, and as he is an Athenian bird, he will not attack them.

⁴⁰ Nicias, the famous Athenian general. —The siege of Melos in 417 B.C., or two years previous to the production of *The Birds*, had especially done him great credit. He was joint commander of the Sicilian expedition.

⁴¹ Procne, the daughter of Pandion, King of Athens.

Epops

If they are your foes by nature, they are your friends in heart, and they come here to give you useful advice.

Chorus

Advice or a useful word from their lips, from them, the enemies of my forebears!

Epops

The wise can often profit by the lessons of a foe, for caution is the mother of safety. 'Tis just such a thing as one will not learn from a friend and which an enemy compels you to know. To begin with, 'tis the foe and not the friend that taught cities to build high walls, to equip long vessels of war; and 'tis this knowledge that protects our children, our slaves and our wealth.

Chorus

Well then, I agree, let us first hear them, for 'tis best; one can even learn something in an enemy's school.

Pisthetærus

Their wrath seems to cool. Draw back a little.

Epops

'Tis only justice, and you will thank me later.

Chorus

Never have we opposed your advice up to now.

Pisthetærus

They are in a more peaceful mood; put down your stew-pot and your two dishes; spit in hand, doing duty for a spear, let us mount guard inside the camp close to the pot and watch in our arsenal closely; for we must not fly.

Euelpides

You are right. But where shall we be buried, if we die?

Pisthetærus

In the Ceramicus;⁴² for, to get a public funeral, we shall tell the Strategi that we fell at Orneæ,⁴³ fighting the country's foes.

Chorus

Return to your ranks and lay down your courage beside your wrath as the Hoplites do. Then let us ask these men who they are, whence they come, and with what intent. Here, Epops, answer me.

Epops

Are you calling me? What do you want of me?

Chorus

Who are they? From what country?

Epops

Strangers, who have come from Greece, the land of the wise.

⁴² A space beyond the walls of Athens which contained the gardens of the Academy and the graves of citizens who had died for their country.

⁴³ A town in Western Argolis, where the Athenians had been recently defeated. The somewhat similar work in Greek signifies 'birds.'

Chorus

And what fate has led them hither to the land of the birds?

Epops

Their love for you and their wish to share your kind of life; to dwell and remain with you always.

Chorus

Indeed, and what are their plans?

Epops

They are wonderful, incredible, unheard of.

Chorus

Why, do they think to see some advantage that determines them to settle here? Are they hoping with our help to triumph over their foes or to be useful to their friends?

Epops

They speak of benefits so great it is impossible either to describe or conceive them; all shall be yours, all that we see here, there, above and below us; this they vouch for.

Chorus

Are they mad?

Epops

They are the sanest people in the world.

Chorus

Clever men?

Epops

The slyest of foxes, cleverness its very self, men of the world, cunning, the cream of knowing folk.

Chorus

Tell them to speak and speak quickly; why, as I listen to you, I am beside myself with delight.

Epops

Here, you there, take all these weapons and hang them up inside close to the fire, near the figure of the god who presides there and under his protection;⁴⁴ as for you, address the birds, tell them why I have gathered them together.

Pisthetærus

Not I, by Apollo, unless they agree with me as the little ape of an armourer agreed with his wife, not to bite me, nor pull me by the parts, nor shove things up my...

Chorus

You mean the... (*puts finger to the bottom*) Oh! be quite at ease.

Pisthetærus

No, I mean my eyes.

Chorus

Agreed.

⁴⁴ Epops is addressing the two slaves, no doubt Xanthias and Manes, who are mentioned later on.

Pisthetærus

Swear it.

Chorus

I swear it and, if I keep my promise, let judges and spectators give me the victory unanimously.

Pisthetærus

It is a bargain.

Chorus

And if I break my word, may I succeed by one vote only.

Herald

Hearken, ye people! Hoplites, pick up your weapons and return to your firesides; do not fail to read the decrees of dismissal we have posted.

Chorus

Man is a truly cunning creature, but nevertheless explain. Perhaps you are going to show me some good way to extend my power, some way that I have not had the wit to find out and which you have discovered. Speak! 'tis to your own interest as well as to mine, for if you secure me some advantage, I will surely share it with you. But what object can have induced you to come among us? Speak boldly, for I shall not break the truce, —until you have told us all.

Pisthetærus

I am bursting with desire to speak; I have already mixed the dough of my address and nothing prevents me from kneading it.... Slave! bring the chaplet and water, which you must pour over my hands. Be quick!⁴⁵

Euelpides

Is it a question of feasting? What does it all mean?

Pisthetærus

By Zeus, no! but I am hunting for fine, tasty words to break down the hardness of their hearts. —I grieve so much for you, who at one time were kings...

Chorus

We kings! Over whom?

Pisthetærus

...of all that exists, firstly of me and of this man, even of Zeus himself. Your race is older than Saturn, the Titans and the Earth.

Chorus

What, older than the Earth!

Pisthetærus

By Phoebus, yes.

Chorus

By Zeus, but I never knew that before!

Pisthetærus

'Tis because you are ignorant and heedless, and have never read your Æsop. 'Tis he who tells

⁴⁵ It was customary, when speaking in public and also at feasts, to wear a chaplet; hence the question Euelpides puts. —The guests wore chaplets of flowers, herbs, and leaves, which had the property of being refreshing.

us that the lark was born before all other creatures, indeed before the Earth; his father died of sickness, but the Earth did not exist then; he remained unburied for five days, when the bird in its dilemma decided, for want of a better place, to entomb its father in its own head.

Euelpides

So that the lark's father is buried at Cephalæ.⁴⁶

Eops

Hence, if we existed before the Earth, before the gods, the kingship belongs to us by right of priority.

Euelpides

Undoubtedly, but sharpen your beak well; Zeus won't be in a hurry to hand over his sceptre to the woodpecker.

Pisthetærus

It was not the gods, but the birds, who were formerly the masters and kings over men; of this I have a thousand proofs. First of all, I will point you to the cock, who governed the Persians before all other monarchs, before Darius and Megabyzus.⁴⁷ 'Tis in memory of his reign that he is called the Persian bird.

Euelpides

For this reason also, even to-day, he alone of all the birds wears his tiara straight on his head, like the Great King.⁴⁸

Pisthetærus

He was so strong, so great, so feared, that even now, on account of his ancient power, everyone jumps out of bed as soon as ever he crows at daybreak. Blacksmiths, potters, tanners, shoemakers, bathmen, corn-dealers, lyre-makers and armourers, all put on their shoes and go to work before it is daylight.

Euelpides

I can tell you something about that. 'Twas the cock's fault that I lost a splendid tunic of Phrygian wool. I was at a feast in town, given to celebrate the birth of a child; I had drunk pretty freely and had just fallen asleep, when a cock, I suppose in a greater hurry than the rest, began to crow. I thought it was dawn and set out for Alimos.⁴⁹ I had hardly got beyond the walls, when a footpad struck me in the back with his bludgeon; down I went and wanted to shout, but he had already made off with my mantle.

Pisthetærus

Formerly also the kite was ruler and king over the Greeks.

Eops

The Greeks?

Pisthetærus

And when he was king, 'twas he who first taught them to fall on their knees before the kites.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ A deme of Attica. In Greek the word also means 'heads,' and hence the pun.

⁴⁷ One of Darius' best generals. After his expedition against the Scythians, this prince gave him the command of the army which he left in Europe. Megabyzus took Perinthos (afterwards called Heraclea) and conquered Thrace.

⁴⁸ All Persians wore the tiara, but always on one side; the Great King alone wore it straight on his head.

⁴⁹ Noted as the birthplace of Thucydides, a *deme* of Attica of the tribe of Leontis. Demosthenes tells us it was thirty-five *stadia* from Athens.

⁵⁰ The appearance of the kite in Greece betokened the return of springtime; it was therefore worshipped as a symbol of that season.

Euelpides

By Zeus! 'tis what I did myself one day on seeing a kite; but at the moment I was on my knees, and leaning backwards⁵¹ with mouth agape, I bolted an *obolus* and was forced to carry my bag home empty.⁵²

Pisthetærus

The cuckoo was king of Egypt and of the whole of Phoenicia. When he called out "cuckoo," all the Phoenicians hurried to the fields to reap their wheat and their barley.⁵³

Euelpides

Hence no doubt the proverb, "Cuckoo! cuckoo! go to the fields, ye circumcised."⁵⁴

Pisthetærus

So powerful were the birds that the kings of Grecian cities, Agamemnon, Menelaus, for instance, carried a bird on the tip of their sceptres, who had his share of all presents.⁵⁵

Euelpides

That I didn't know and was much astonished when I saw Priam come upon the stage in the tragedies with a bird, which kept watching Lysicrates⁵⁶ to see if he got any present.

Pisthetærus

But the strongest proof of all is, that Zeus, who now reigns, is represented as standing with an eagle on his head as a symbol of his royalty;⁵⁷ his daughter has an owl, and Phoebus, as his servant, has a hawk.

Euelpides

By Demeter, 'tis well spoken. But what are all these birds doing in heaven?

Pisthetærus

When anyone sacrifices and, according to the rite, offers the entrails to the gods, these birds take their share before Zeus. Formerly men always swore by the birds and never by the gods; even now Lampon⁵⁸ swears by the goose, when he wants to lie.... Thus 'tis clear that you were great and sacred, but now you are looked upon as slaves, as fools, as Helots; stones are thrown at you as at raving madmen, even in holy places. A crowd of bird-catchers sets snares, traps, limed-twigs and nets of all sorts for you; you are caught, you are sold in heaps and the buyers finger you over to be certain you are fat. Again, if they would but serve you up simply roasted; but they rasp cheese into a mixture of oil, vinegar and laserwort, to which another sweet and greasy sauce is added, and the whole is poured scalding hot over your back, for all the world as if you were diseased meat.

Chorus

Man, your words have made my heart bleed; I have groaned over the treachery of our fathers, who knew not how to transmit to us the high rank they held from their forefathers. But 'tis a

⁵¹ To look at the kite, who no doubt was flying high in the sky.

⁵² As already shown, the Athenians were addicted to carrying small coins in their mouths. —This *obolus* was for the purpose of buying flour to fill the bag he was carrying

⁵³ In Phoenicia and Egypt the cuckoo makes its appearance about harvest-time.

⁵⁴ This was an Egyptian proverb, meaning, 'When the cuckoo sings we go harvesting.' Both the Phoenicians and the Egyptians practiced circumcision.

⁵⁵ The staff, called a sceptre, generally terminated in a piece of carved work, representing a flower, a fruit, and most often a bird.

⁵⁶ A general accused of treachery. The bird watches Lysicrates, because, according to Pisthetærus, he had a right to a share of the presents.

⁵⁷ It is thus that Phidias represents his Olympian Zeus.

⁵⁸ One of the diviners sent to Sybaris (in Magna Græcia, S. Italy) with the Athenian colonists, who rebuilt the town under the new name of Thurium.

benevolent Genius, a happy Fate, that sends you to us; you shall be our deliverer and I place the destiny of my little ones and my own in your hands with every confidence. But hasten to tell me what must be done; we should not be worthy to live, if we did not seek to regain our royalty by every possible means.

Pisthetærus

First I advise that the birds gather together in one city and that they build a wall of great bricks, like that at Babylon, round the plains of the air and the whole region of space that divides earth from heaven.

Epops

Oh, Cebriones! oh, Porphyrion!⁵⁹ what a terribly strong place!

Pisthetærus

Then, this being well done and completed, you demand back the empire from Zeus; if he will not agree, if he refuses and does not at once confess himself beaten, you declare a sacred war against him and forbid the gods henceforward to pass through your country with lust, as hitherto, for the purpose of fondling their Alcmenas, their Alopes, or their Semeles!⁶⁰ if they try to pass through, you infibulate them with rings so that they can work no longer. You send another messenger to mankind, who will proclaim to them that the birds are kings, that for the future they must first of all sacrifice to them, and only afterwards to the gods; that it is fitting to appoint to each deity the bird that has most in common with it. For instance, are they sacrificing to Aphrodite, let them at the same time offer barley to the coot; are they immolating a sheep to Posidon, let them consecrate wheat in honour of the duck;⁶¹ is a steer being offered to Heracles, let honey-cakes be dedicated to the gull;⁶² is a goat being slain for King Zeus, there is a King-Bird, the wren,⁶³ to whom the sacrifice of a male gnat is due before Zeus himself even.

Euelpides

This notion of an immolated gnat delights me! And now let the great Zeus thunder!

Epops

But how will mankind recognize us as gods and not as jays? Us, who have wings and fly?

Pisthetærus

You talk rubbish! Hermes is a god and has wings and flies, and so do many other gods. First of all, Victory flies with golden wings, Eros is undoubtedly winged too, and Iris is compared by Homer to a timorous dove.⁶⁴ If men in their blindness do not recognize you as gods and continue to worship the dwellers in Olympus, then a cloud of sparrows greedy for corn must descend upon their fields and eat up all their seeds; we shall see then if Demeter will mete them out any wheat.

⁵⁹ As if he were saying, "Oh, gods!" Like Lampon, he swears by the birds, instead of swearing by the gods. — The names of these birds are those of two of the Titans.

⁶⁰ Alcmena, wife of Amphitryon, King of Thebes and mother of Heracles. — Semele, the daughter of Cadmus and Hermione and mother of Bacchus; both seduced by Zeus. — Alope, daughter of Cercyon, a robber, who reigned at Eleusis and was conquered by Perseus. Alope was honoured with Posidon's caresses; by him she had a son named Hippothous, at first brought up by shepherds but who afterwards was restored to the throne of his grandfather by Theseus.

⁶¹ Because water is the duck's domain, as it is that of Posidon.

⁶² Because the gull, like Heracles, is voracious.

⁶³ The Germans still call it *Zaunkonig* and the French *roitelet*, both names thus containing the idea of *king*.

⁶⁴ The scholiast draws our attention to the fact that Homer says this of Hera and not of Iris (*Iliad*, V, 778); it is only another proof that the text of Homer has reached us in a corrupted form, or it may be that Aristophanes was liable, like other people, to occasional mistakes of quotation.

Euelpides

By Zeus, she'll take good care she does not, and you will see her inventing a thousand excuses.

Pisthetærus

The crows too will prove your divinity to them by pecking out the eyes of their flocks and of their draught-oxen; and then let Apollo cure them, since he is a physician and is paid for the purpose.⁶⁵

Euelpides

Oh! don't do that! Wait first until I have sold my two young bullocks.

Pisthetærus

If on the other hand they recognize that you are God, the principle of life, that you are Earth, Saturn, Posidon, they shall be loaded with benefits.

Epops

Name me one of these then.

Pisthetærus

Firstly, the locusts shall not eat up their vine-blossoms; a legion of owls and kestrels will devour them. Moreover, the gnats and the gall-bugs shall no longer ravage the figs; a flock of thrushes shall swallow the whole host down to the very last.

Epops

And how shall we give wealth to mankind? This is their strongest passion.

Pisthetærus

When they consult the omens, you will point them to the richest mines, you will reveal the paying ventures to the diviner, and not another shipwreck will happen or sailor perish.

Epops

No more shall perish? How is that?

Pisthetærus

When the auguries are examined before starting on a voyage, some bird will not fail to say, "Don't start! there will be a storm," or else, "Go! you will make a most profitable venture."

Euelpides

I shall buy a trading-vessel and go to sea, I will not stay with you.

Pisthetærus

You will discover treasures to them, which were buried in former times, for you know them. Do not all men say, "None knows where my treasure lies, unless perchance it be some bird."⁶⁶

Euelpides

I shall sell my boat and buy a spade to unearth the vessels.

Epops

And how are we to give them health, which belongs to the gods?

Pisthetærus

If they are happy, is not that the chief thing towards health? The miserable man is never well.

⁶⁵ In sacrifices.

⁶⁶ An Athenian proverb.

Eops

Old Age also dwells in Olympus. How will they get at it? Must they die in early youth?

Pisthetærus

Why, the birds, by Zeus, will add three hundred years to their life.

Eops

From whom will they take them?

Pisthetærus

From whom? Why, from themselves. Don't you know the cawing crow lives five times as long as a man?

Euelpides

Ah! ah! these are far better kings for us than Zeus!

Pisthetærus

Far better, are they not? And firstly, we shall not have to build them temples of hewn stone, closed with gates of gold; they will dwell amongst the bushes and in the thickets of green oak; the most venerated of birds will have no other temple than the foliage of the olive tree; we shall not go to Delphi or to Ammon to sacrifice;⁶⁷ but standing erect in the midst of arbutus and wild olives and holding forth our hands filled with wheat and barley, we shall pray them to admit us to a share of the blessings they enjoy and shall at once obtain them for a few grains of wheat.

Chorus

Old man, whom I detested, you are now to me the dearest of all; never shall I, if I can help it, fail to follow your advice. Inspired by your words, I threaten my rivals the gods, and I swear that if you march in alliance with me against the gods and are faithful to our just, loyal and sacred bond, we shall soon have shattered their sceptre. 'Tis our part to undertake the toil, 'tis yours to advise.

Eops

By Zeus! 'tis no longer the time to delay and loiter like Nicias;⁶⁸ let us act as promptly as possible.... In the first place, come, enter my nest built of brushwood and blades of straw, and tell me your names.

Pisthetærus

That is soon done; my name is Pisthetærus.

Eops

And his?

Pisthetærus

Euelpides, of the *deme* of Thria.

Eops

Good! and good luck to you.

Pisthetærus

We accept the omen.

⁶⁷ A celebrated temple to Zeus in an oasis of Libya.

⁶⁸ Nicias was commander, along with Demosthenes, and later on Alcibiades, of the Athenian forces before Syracuse, in the ill-fated Sicilian Expedition, 415-413 B.C. He was much blamed for dilatoriness and indecision.

Epops

Come in here.

Pisthetærus

Very well, 'tis you who lead us and must introduce us.

Epops

Come then.

Pisthetærus

Oh! my god! do come back here. Hi! tell us how we are to follow you. You can fly, but we cannot.

Epops

Well, well.

Pisthetærus

Remember Æsop's fables. It is told there, that the fox fared very ill, because he had made an alliance with the eagle.

Epops

Be at ease. You shall eat a certain root and wings will grow on your shoulders.

Pisthetærus

Then let us enter. Xanthias and Manes,⁶⁹ pick up our baggage.

Chorus

Hi! Epops! do you hear me?

Epops

What's the matter?

Chorus

Take them off to dine well and call your mate, the melodious Procne, whose songs are worthy of the Muses; she will delight our leisure moments.

Pisthetærus

Oh! I conjure you, accede to their wish; for this delightful bird will leave her rushes at the sound of your voice; for the sake of the gods, let her come here, so that we may contemplate the nightingale.⁷⁰

Epops

Let it be as you desire. Come forth, Procne, show yourself to these strangers.

Pisthetærus

Oh! great Zeus! what a beautiful little bird! what a dainty form! what brilliant plumage!⁷¹

Euelpides

Do you know how dearly I should like to splint her legs for her?

Pisthetærus

She is dazzling all over with gold, like a young girl.⁷²

⁶⁹ Servants of Pisthetærus and Euelpides.

⁷⁰ It has already been mentioned that, according to the legend followed by Aristophanes, Procne had been changed into a nightingale and Philomela into a swallow.

⁷¹ The actor, representing Procne, was dressed out as a courtesan, but wore a mask of a bird.

⁷² Young unmarried girls wore golden ornaments; the apparel of married women was much simpler.

Euelpides

Oh! how I should like to kiss her!

Pisthetærus

Why, wretched man, she has two little sharp points on her beak!

Euelpides

I would treat her like an egg, the shell of which we remove before eating it; I would take off her mask and then kiss her pretty face.

Epops

Let us go in.

Pisthetærus

Lead the way, and may success attend us.

Chorus

Lovable golden bird, whom I cherish above all others, you, whom I associate with all my songs, nightingale, you have come, you have come, to show yourself to me and to charm me with your notes. Come, you, who play spring melodies upon the harmonious flute,⁷³ lead off our anapæsts.⁷⁴

Weak mortals, chained to the earth, creatures of clay as frail as the foliage of the woods, you unfortunate race, whose life is but darkness, as unreal as a shadow, the illusion of a dream, hearken to us, who are immortal beings, ethereal, ever young and occupied with eternal thoughts, for we shall teach you about all celestial matters; you shall know thoroughly what is the nature of the birds, what the origin of the gods, of the rivers, of Erebus, and Chaos; thanks to us, even Prodicus⁷⁵ will envy you your knowledge.

At the beginning there was only Chaos, Night, dark Erebus, and deep Tartarus. Earth, the air and heaven had no existence. Firstly, black-winged Night laid a germless egg in the bosom of the infinite deeps of Erebus, and from this, after the revolution of long ages, sprang the graceful Eros with his glittering golden wings, swift as the whirlwinds of the tempest. He mated in deep Tartarus with dark Chaos, winged like himself, and thus hatched forth our race, which was the first to see the light. That of the Immortals did not exist until Eros had brought together all the ingredients of the world, and from their marriage Heaven, Ocean, Earth and the imperishable race of blessed gods sprang into being. Thus our origin is very much older than that of the dwellers in Olympus. We are the offspring of Eros; there are a thousand proofs to show it. We have wings and we lend assistance to lovers. How many handsome youths, who had sworn to remain insensible, have not been vanquished by our power and have yielded themselves to their lovers when almost at the end of their youth, being led away by the gift of a quail, a waterfowl, a goose, or a cock.⁷⁶

And what important services do not the birds render to mortals! First of all, they mark the seasons for them, springtime, winter, and autumn. Does the screaming crane migrate to Libya, —it warns the husbandman to sow, the pilot to take his ease beside his tiller hung up in his dwelling,⁷⁷ and Orestes⁷⁸ to weave a tunic, so that the rigorous cold may not drive him

⁷³ The actor, representing Procne, was a flute-player.

⁷⁴ The *parabasis*.

⁷⁵ A sophist of the island of Ceos, a disciple of Protagoras, as celebrated for his knowledge as for his eloquence. The Athenians condemned him to death as a corrupter of youth in 396 B.C.

⁷⁶ Lovers were wont to make each other presents of birds. The cock and the goose are mentioned, of course, in jest.

⁷⁷ i.e. that it gave notice of the approach of winter, during which season the Ancients did not venture to sea.

⁷⁸ A notorious robber.

any more to strip other folk. When the kite reappears, he tells of the return of spring and of the period when the fleece of the sheep must be clipped. Is the swallow in sight? All hasten to sell their warm tunic and to buy some light clothing. We are your Ammon, Delphi, Dodona, your Phoebus Apollo.⁷⁹ Before undertaking anything, whether a business transaction, a marriage, or the purchase of food, you consult the birds by reading the omens, and you give this name of omen⁸⁰ to all signs that tell of the future. With you a word is an omen, you call a sneeze an omen, a meeting an omen, an unknown sound an omen, a slave or an ass an omen.⁸¹ Is it not clear that we are a prophetic Apollo to you? If you recognize us as gods, we shall be your divining Muses, through us you will know the winds and the seasons, summer, winter, and the temperate months. We shall not withdraw ourselves to the highest clouds like Zeus, but shall be among you and shall give to you and to your children and the children of your children, health and wealth, long life, peace, youth, laughter, songs and feasts; in short, you will all be so well off, that you will be weary and satiated with enjoyment.

Oh, rustic Muse of such varied note, *tio, tio, tio, tiotinx*, I sing with you in the groves and on the mountain tops, *tio, tio, tio, tio, tiotinx*.⁸² I poured forth sacred strains from my golden throat in honour of the god Pan,⁸³ *tio, tio, tio, tiotinx*, from the top of the thickly leaved ash, and my voice mingles with the mighty choirs who extol Cybele on the mountain tops,⁸⁴ *totototototototinx*. 'Tis to our concerts that Phrynichus comes to pillage like a bee the ambrosia of his songs, the sweetness of which so charms the ear, *tio, tio, tio, tio, tinx*.

If there be one of you spectators who wishes to spend the rest of his life quietly among the birds, let him come to us. All that is disgraceful and forbidden by law on earth is on the contrary honourable among us, the birds. For instance, among you 'tis a crime to beat your father, but with us 'tis an estimable deed; it's considered fine to run straight at your father and hit him, saying, "Come, lift your spur if you want to fight."⁸⁵ The runaway slave, whom you brand, is only a spotted francolin with us.⁸⁶ Are you Phrygian like Spintharus?⁸⁷ Among us you would be the Phrygian bird, the goldfinch, of the race of Philemon.⁸⁸ Are you a slave and a Carian like Execestides? Among us you can create yourself fore-fathers;⁸⁹ you can always find relations. Does the son of Pisiyas want to betray the gates of the city to the foe? Let him become a partridge, the fitting offspring of his father; among us there is no shame in escaping as cleverly as a partridge.

So the swans on the banks of the Hebrus, *tio, tio, tio, tio, tiotinx*, mingle their voices to serenade Apollo, *tio, tio, tio, tio, tiotinx*, flapping their wings the while, *tio, tio, tio, tio, tiotinx*; their notes reach beyond the clouds of heaven; all the dwellers

⁷⁹ Meaning, "We are your oracles." —Dodona was an oracle in Epirus. —The temple of Zeus there was surrounded by a dense forest, all the trees of which were endowed with the gift of prophecy; both the sacred oaks and the pigeons that lived in them answered the questions of those who came to consult the oracle in pure Greek.

⁸⁰ The Greek word for 'omen' is the same as that for 'bird.'

⁸¹ A satire on the passion of the Greeks for seeing an omen in everything.

⁸² An imitation of the nightingale's song.

⁸³ God of the groves and wilds.

⁸⁴ The 'Mother of the Gods'; roaming the mountains, she held dances, always attended by Pan and his accompanying rout of Fauns and Satyrs.

⁸⁵ An allusion to cock-fighting; the birds are armed with brazen spurs.

⁸⁶ An allusion to the spots on this bird, which resemble the scars left by a branding iron.

⁸⁷ He was of Asiatic origin, but wished to pass for an Athenian.

⁸⁸ Or Philammon, King of Thrace; the scholiast remarks that the Phrygians and the Thracians had a common origin.

⁸⁹ The Greek word here is also the name of a little bird.

in the forest stand still with astonishment and delight; a calm rests upon the waters, and the Graces and the choirs in Olympus catch up the strain, *tio, tio, tio, tio, tiotinx*.

There is nothing more useful nor more pleasant than to have wings. To begin with, just let us suppose a spectator to be dying with hunger and to be weary of the choruses of the tragic poets; if he were winged, he would fly off, go home to dine and come back with his stomach filled. Some Patroclides in urgent need would not have to soil his cloak, but could fly off, satisfy his requirements, and, having recovered his breath, return. If one of you, it matters not who, had adulterous relations and saw the husband of his mistress in the seats of the senators, he might stretch his wings, fly thither, and, having appeased his craving, resume his place. Is it not the most priceless gift of all, to be winged? Look at Diitrephes!⁹⁰ His wings were only wicker-work ones, and yet he got himself chosen Phylarch and then Hipparch; from being nobody, he has risen to be famous; 'tis now the finest gilded cock of his tribe.⁹¹

Pisthetærus

Halloa! What's this? By Zeus! I never saw anything so funny in all my life.⁹²

Euelpides

What makes you laugh?

Pisthetærus

'Tis your bits of wings. D'you know what you look like? Like a goose painted by some dauber-fellow.

Euelpides

And you look like a close-shaven blackbird.

Pisthetærus

'Tis ourselves asked for this transformation, and, as Æschylus has it, "These are no borrowed feathers, but truly our own."⁹³

Epops

Come now, what must be done?

Pisthetærus

First give our city a great and famous name, then sacrifice to the gods.

Euelpides

I think so too.

Epops

Let's see. What shall our city be called?

Pisthetærus

Will you have a high-sounding Laconian name? Shall we call it Sparta?

⁹⁰ A basket-maker who had become rich. —The Phylarchs were the headmen of the tribes. They presided at the private assemblies and were charged with the management of the treasury. —The Hipparchs, as the name implies, were the leaders of the cavalry; there were only two of these in the Athenian army.

⁹¹ He had become a senator.

⁹² Pisthetærus and Euelpides now both return with wings.

⁹³ Meaning, 'tis we who wanted to have these wings. —The verse from Æschylus, quoted here, is taken from *The Myrmidons*, a tragedy of which only a few fragments remain.

Euelpides

What! call my town Sparta? Why, I would not use esparto for my bed,⁹⁴ even though I had nothing but bands of rushes.

Pisthetærus

Well then, what name can you suggest?

Euelpides

Some name borrowed from the clouds, from these lofty regions in which we dwell—in short, some well-known name.

Pisthetærus

Do you like Nephelococcygia?⁹⁵

Epops

Oh! capital! truly 'tis a brilliant thought!

Euelpides

Is it in Nephelococcygia that all the wealth of Theovenes⁹⁶ and most of Æschines⁹⁷ is?

Pisthetærus

No, 'tis rather the plain of Phlegra,⁹⁸ where the gods withered the pride of the sons of the Earth with their shafts.

Euelpides

Oh! what a splendid city! But what god shall be its patron? for whom shall we weave the *peplus*?⁹⁹

Pisthetærus

Why not choose Athene Polias?¹⁰⁰

Euelpides

Oh! what a well-ordered town 'twould be to have a female deity armed from head to foot, while Clisthenes¹⁰¹ was spinning!

Pisthetærus

Who then shall guard the Pelargicon?¹⁰²

Epops

One of us, a bird of Persian strain, who is everywhere proclaimed to be the bravest of all, a true chick of Ares.¹⁰³

Euelpides

Oh! noble chick! What a well-chosen god for a rocky home!

⁹⁴ The Greek word signified the city of Sparta, and also a kind of broom used for weaving rough matting, which served for the beds of the very poor.

⁹⁵ A fanciful name constructed from [the word for] a cloud, and [the word for] a cuckoo; thus a city of clouds and cuckoos. —*Wolkenkuckelheim* is a clever approximation in German. Cloud-cuckoo-town, perhaps, is the best English equivalent.

⁹⁶ He was a boaster nicknamed 'smoke,' because he promised a great deal and never kept his word.

⁹⁷ Also mentioned in *The Wasps*.

⁹⁸ Because the war of the Titans against the gods was only a fiction of the poets.

⁹⁹ A sacred cloth, with which the statue of Athene in the Acropolis was draped.

¹⁰⁰ Meaning, to be patron-goddess of the city. Athene had a temple of this name.

¹⁰¹ An Athenian effeminate, frequently ridiculed by Aristophanes

¹⁰² This was the name of the wall surrounding the Acropolis.

¹⁰³ *i.e.* the fighting cock.

Pisthetærus

Come! into the air with you to help the workers who are building the wall; carry up rubble, strip yourself to mix the mortar, take up the hod, tumble down the ladder, an you like, post sentinels, keep the fire smouldering beneath the ashes, go round the walls, bell in hand,¹⁰⁴ and go to sleep up there yourself; then dispatch two heralds, one to the gods above, the other to mankind on earth and come back here.

Euelpides

As for yourself, remain here, and may the plague take you for a troublesome fellow!

Pisthetærus

Go, friend, go where I send you, for without you my orders cannot be obeyed. For myself, I want to sacrifice to the new god, and I am going to summon the priest who must preside at the ceremony. Slaves! slaves! bring forward the basket and the lustral water.

Chorus

I do as you do, and I wish as you wish, and I implore you to address powerful and solemn prayers to the gods, and in addition to immolate a sheep as a token of our gratitude. Let us sing the Pythian chant in honour of the god, and let Chæris accompany our voices.

Pisthetærus (to the Flute-Player)

Enough! but, by Heracles! what is this? Great gods! I have seen many prodigious things, but I never saw a muzzled raven.¹⁰⁵

Epops

Priest! 'tis high time! Sacrifice to the new gods.

Priest

I begin, but where is he with the basket? Pray to the Vesta of the birds, to the kite, who presides over the hearth, and to all the god and goddess-birds who dwell in Olympus.

Chorus

Oh! Hawk, the sacred guardian of Sunium, oh, god of the storks!

Priest

Pray to the swan of Delos, to Latona the mother of the quails, and to Artemis, the goldfinch.

Pisthetærus

'Tis no longer Artemis Colænis, but Artemis the goldfinch.¹⁰⁶

Priest

And to Bacchus, the finch and Cybele, the ostrich and mother of the gods and mankind.

Chorus

Oh! sovereign ostrich, Cybele, The mother of Cleocritus,¹⁰⁷ grant health and safety to the Nephelococcygians as well as to the dwellers in Chios...

¹⁰⁴ To waken the sentinels, who might else have fallen asleep. —There are several merry contradictions in the various parts of this list of injunctions.

¹⁰⁵ In allusion to the leather strap which flute-players wore to constrict the cheeks and add to the power of the breath. The performer here no doubt wore a raven's mask.

¹⁰⁶ Hellanicus, the Mitylenian historian, tells that this surname of Artemis is derived from Colænus, King of Athens before Cecrops and a descendant of Hermes. In obedience to an oracle he erected a temple to the goddess, invoking her as Artemis Colænis (the Artemis of Colænus).

¹⁰⁷ This Cleocritus, says the scholiast, was long-necked and strutted like an ostrich.

Pisthetærus

The dwellers in Chios! Ah! I am delighted they should be thus mentioned on all occasions.¹⁰⁸

Chorus

...to the heroes, the birds, to the sons of heroes, to the porphyrion, the pelican, the spoon-bill, the redbreast, the grouse, the peacock, the horned-owl, the teal, the bittern, the heron, the stormy petrel, the fig-pecker, the titmouse...

Pisthetærus

Stop! stop! you drive me crazy with your endless list. Why, wretch, to what sacred feast are you inviting the vultures and the sea-eagles? Don't you see that a single kite could easily carry off the lot at once? Begone, you and your fillets and all; I shall know how to complete the sacrifice by myself.

Priest

It is imperative that I sing another sacred chant for the rite of the lustral water, and that I invoke the immortals, or at least one of them, provided always that you have some suitable food to offer him; from what I see here, in the shape of gifts, there is naught whatever but horn and hair.

Pisthetærus

Let us address our sacrifices and our prayers to the winged gods.

A Poet

Oh, Muse! celebrate happy Nephelococcygia in your hymns.

Pisthetærus

What have we here? Where did you come from, tell me? Who are you?

Poet

I am he whose language is sweeter than honey, the zealous slave of the Muses, as Homer has it.

Pisthetærus

You a slave! and yet you wear your hair long?

Poet

No, but the fact is all we poets are the assiduous slaves of the Muses, according to Homer.

Pisthetærus

In truth your little cloak is quite holy too through zeal! But, poet, what ill wind drove you here?

Poet

I have composed verses in honour of your Nephelococcygia, a host of splendid dithyrambs and parthenians¹⁰⁹ worthy of Simonides himself.

Pisthetærus

And when did you compose them? How long since?

Poet

Oh! 'tis long, aye, very long, that I have sung in honour of this city.

¹⁰⁸ The Chians were the most faithful allies of Athens, and hence their name was always mentioned in prayers, decrees, etc.

¹⁰⁹ Verses sung by maidens.

Pisthetærus

But I am only celebrating its foundation with this sacrifice;¹¹⁰ I have only just named it, as is done with little babies.

Poet

"Just as the chargers fly with the speed of the wind, so does the voice of the Muses take its flight. Oh! thou noble founder of the town of Ætna,¹¹¹ thou, whose name recalls the holy sacrifices,¹¹² make us such gift as thy generous heart shall suggest."

Pisthetærus

He will drive us silly if we do not get rid of him by some present. Here! you, who have a fur as well as your tunic, take it off and give it to this clever poet. Come, take this fur; you look to me to be shivering with cold.

Poet

My Muse will gladly accept this gift; but engrave these verses of Pindar's on your mind.

Pisthetærus

Oh! what a pest! 'Tis impossible then to be rid of him!

Poet

"Straton wanders among the Scythian nomads, but has no linen garment. He is sad at only wearing an animal's pelt and no tunic." Do you conceive my bent?

Pisthetærus

I understand that you want me to offer you a tunic. Hi! you (*to Euelpides*), take off yours; we must help the poet.... Come, you, take it and begone.

Poet

I am going, and these are the verses that I address to this city: "Phoebus of the golden throne, celebrate this shivery, freezing city; I have travelled through fruitful and snow-covered plains. *Tralala! Tralala!*"¹¹³

Pisthetærus

What are you chanting us about frosts? Thanks to the tunic, you no longer fear them. Ah! by Zeus! I could not have believed this cursed fellow could so soon have learnt the way to our city. Come, priest, take the lustral water and circle the altar.

Priest

Let all keep silence!

A Prophet

Let not the goat be sacrificed.¹¹⁴

Pisthetærus

Who are you?

Prophet

Who am I? A prophet.

Pisthetærus

Get you gone.

¹¹⁰ This ceremony took place on the tenth day after birth, and may be styled the pagan baptism.

¹¹¹ Hiero, tyrant of Syracuse. —This passage is borrowed from Pindar.

¹¹² *Hiero* in Greek means sacrifice

¹¹³ A parody of poetic *pathos*, not to say *bathos*.

¹¹⁴ Which the priest was preparing to sacrifice.

Prophet

Wretched man, insult not sacred things. For there is an oracle of Bacis, which exactly applies to Nephelococcygia.

Pisthetærus

Why did you not reveal it to me before I founded my city?

Prophet

The divine spirit was against it.

Pisthetærus

Well, 'tis best to know the terms of the oracle.

Prophet

"But when the wolves and the white crows shall dwell together between Corinth and Sicyon..."

Pisthetærus

But how do the Corinthians concern me?

Prophet

'Tis the regions of the air that Bacis indicated in this manner. "They must first sacrifice a white-fleeced goat to Pandora, and give the prophet, who first reveals my words, a good cloak and new sandals."

Pisthetærus

Are the sandals there?

Prophet

Read. "And besides this a goblet of wine and a good share of the entrails of the victim."

Pisthetærus

Of the entrails—is it so written?

Prophet

Read. "If you do as I command, divine youth, you shall be an eagle among the clouds; if not, you shall be neither turtle-dove, nor eagle, nor woodpecker."

Pisthetærus

Is all that there?

Prophet

Read.

Pisthetærus

This oracle in no sort of way resembles the one Apollo dictated to me: "If an impostor comes without invitation to annoy you during the sacrifice and to demand a share of the victim, apply a stout stick to his ribs."

Prophet

You are drivelling.

Pisthetærus

"And don't spare him, were he an eagle from out of the clouds, were it Lampon¹¹⁵ himself or the great Diopithes."¹¹⁶

Prophet

Is all that there?

Pisthetærus

Here, read it yourself, and go and hang yourself.

Prophet

Oh! unfortunate wretch that I am.

Pisthetærus

Away with you, and take your prophecies elsewhere.

Meton¹¹⁷

I have come to you.

Pisthetærus

Yet another pest! What have you come to do? What's your plan? What's the purpose of your journey? Why these splendid buskins?

Meton

I want to survey the plains of the air for you and to parcel them into lots.

Pisthetærus

In the name of the gods, who are you?

Meton

Who am I? Meton, known throughout Greece and at Colonus.¹¹⁸

Pisthetærus

What are these things?

Meton

Tools for measuring the air. In truth, the spaces in the air have precisely the form of a furnace. With this bent ruler I draw a line from top to bottom; from one of its points I describe a circle with the compass. Do you understand?

Pisthetærus

Not the very least.

Meton

With the straight ruler I set to work to inscribe a square within this circle; in its centre will be the market-place, into which all the straight streets will lead, converging to this centre like a star, which, although only orbicular, sends forth its rays in a straight line from all sides.

Pisthetærus

Meton, you new Thales...¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Noted Athenian diviner, who, when the power was still shared between Thucydides and Pericles, predicted that it would soon be centred in the hands of the latter; his ground for this prophecy was the sight of a ram with a single horn.

¹¹⁶ No doubt another Athenian diviner, and possibly the same person whom Aristophanes names in *The Knights* and *The Wasps* as being a thief.

¹¹⁷ A celebrated geometrician and astronomer.

¹¹⁸ A *deme* contiguous to Athens. It is as though he said, "Well known throughout all England and at Croydon.

¹¹⁹ Thales was no less famous as a geometrician than he was as a sage.

Meton

What d'you want with me?

Pisthetærus

I want to give you a proof of my friendship. Use your legs.

Meton

Why, what have I to fear?

Pisthetærus

'Tis the same here as in Sparta. Strangers are driven away, and blows rain down as thick as hail.

Meton

Is there sedition in your city?

Pisthetærus

No, certainly not.

Meton

What's wrong then?

Pisthetærus

We are agreed to sweep all quacks and impostors far from our borders.

Meton

Then I'm off.

Pisthetærus

I fear 'tis too late. The thunder growls already. (*Beats him.*)

Meton

Oh, woe! oh, woe!

Pisthetærus

I warned you. Now, be off, and do your surveying somewhere else. (*Meton takes to his heels.*)

An Inspector

Where are the *Proxeni*?¹²⁰

Pisthetærus

Who is this Sardanapalus?¹²¹

Inspector

I have been appointed by lot to come to Nephelococcygia as inspector.¹²²

Pisthetærus

An inspector! and who sends you here, you rascal?

Inspector

A decree of Teleas.¹²³

¹²⁰ Officers of Athens, whose duty was to protect strangers who came on political or other business, and see to their interests generally.

¹²¹ He addresses the inspector thus because of the royal and magnificent manners he assumes.

¹²² Magistrates appointed to inspect the tributary towns.

¹²³ A much-despised citizen, already mentioned. He ironically supposes him invested with the powers of an Archon, which ordinarily were entrusted only to men of good repute.

Pisthetærus

Will you just pocket your salary, do nothing, and be off?

Inspector

I' faith! that I will; I am urgently needed to be at Athens to attend the assembly; for I am charged with the interests of Pharnaces.¹²⁴

Pisthetærus

Take it then, and be off. See, here is your salary. (*Beats him.*)

Inspector

What does this mean?

Pisthetærus

'Tis the assembly where you have to defend Pharnaces.

Inspector

You shall testify that they dare to strike me, the inspector.

Pisthetærus

Are you not going to clear out with your urns? 'Tis not to be believed; they send us inspectors before we have so much as paid sacrifice to the gods.

A Dealer in Decrees

"If the Nephelococcygian does wrong to the Athenian..."

Pisthetærus

Now whatever are these cursed parchments?

Dealer in Decrees

I am a dealer in decrees, and I have come here to sell you the new laws.

Pisthetærus

Which?

Dealer in Decrees

"The Nephelococcygians shall adopt the same weights, measures and decrees as the Olophyxians."¹²⁵

Pisthetærus

And you shall soon be imitating the Ototyxiens. (*Beats him.*)

Dealer in Decrees

Hullo! what are you doing?

Pisthetærus

Now will you be off with your decrees? For I am going to let *you* see some severe ones.

Inspector (returning)

I summon Pisthetærus for outrage for the month of Munychion.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ A Persian satrap. —An allusion to certain orators, who, bribed with Asiatic gold, had often defended the interests of the foe in the Public Assembly.

¹²⁵ A Macedonian people in the peninsula of Chalcidice. This name is chosen because of its similarity to the Greek word for 'to groan.' It is from another verb, meaning the same thing, that Pisthetærus coins the name of Ototyxiens, i.e. groaners, because he is about to beat the dealer. —The mother-country had the right to impose any law it chose upon its colonies.

¹²⁶ Corresponding to our month of April.

Pisthetærus

Ha! my friend! are you still there?

Dealer in Decrees

"Should anyone drive away the magistrates and not receive them, according to the decree duly posted..."

Pisthetærus

What! rascal! you are there too?

Inspector

Woe to you! I'll have you condemned to a fine of ten thousand drachmæ.

Pisthetærus

And I'll smash your urns.¹²⁷

Inspector

Do you recall that evening when you stooped against the column where the decrees are posted?

Pisthetærus

Here! here! let him be seized. (*The Inspector runs off.*) Well! don't you want to stop any longer?

Priest

Let us get indoors as quick as possible; we will sacrifice the goat inside.¹²⁸

Chorus

Henceforth it is to me that mortals must address their sacrifices and their prayers. Nothing escapes my sight nor my might. My glance embraces the universe, I preserve the fruit in the flower by destroying the thousand kinds of voracious insects the soil produces, which attack the trees and feed on the germ when it has scarcely formed in the calyx; I destroy those who ravage the balmy terrace gardens like a deadly plague; all these gnawing crawling creatures perish beneath the lash of my wing. I hear it proclaimed everywhere: "A talent for him who shall kill Diagoras of Melos,¹²⁹ and a talent for him who destroys one of the dead tyrants."¹³⁰ We likewise wish to make our proclamation: "A talent to him among you who shall kill Philocrates, the Struthian;¹³¹ four, if he brings him to us alive. For this Philocrates skewers the finches together and sells them at the rate of an *obolus* for seven. He tortures the thrushes by blowing them out, so that they may look bigger, sticks their own feathers into the nostrils of blackbirds, and collects pigeons, which he shuts up and forces them, fastened in a net, to decoy others." That is what we wish to proclaim. And if anyone is keeping birds shut up in his yard, let him hasten to let them loose; those who disobey shall be seized by the birds and we shall put them in chains, so that in their turn they may decoy other men.

¹²⁷ Which the inspector had brought with him for the purpose of inaugurating the assemblies of the people or some tribunal.

¹²⁸ So that the sacrifices might no longer be interrupted.

¹²⁹ A disciple of Democritus; he passed over from superstition to atheism. The injustice and perversity of mankind led him to deny the existence of the gods, to lay bare the mysteries and to break the idols. The Athenians had put a price on his head, so he left Greece and perished soon afterwards in a storm at sea.

¹³⁰ By this jest Aristophanes means to imply that tyranny is dead, and that no one aspires to despotic power, though this silly accusation was constantly being raised by the demagogues and always favourably received by the populace.

¹³¹ A poulterer. —Strouthian, used in joke to designate him, as if from the name of his *deme*, is derived from the Greek for 'a sparrow.' The birds' foe is thus grotesquely furnished with an ornithological surname.

Happy indeed is the race of winged birds who need no cloak in winter! Neither do I fear the relentless rays of the fiery dog-days; when the divine grasshopper, intoxicated with the sunlight, when noon is burning the ground, is breaking out into shrill melody; my home is beneath the foliage in the flowery meadows. I winter in deep caverns, where I frolic with the mountain nymphs, while in spring I despoil the gardens of the Graces and gather the white, virgin berry on the myrtle bushes.

I want now to speak to the judges about the prize they are going to award; if they are favourable to us, we will load them with benefits far greater than those Paris¹³² received. Firstly, the owls of Laurium,¹³³ which every judge desires above all things, shall never be wanting to you; you shall see them homing with you, building their nests in your money-bags and laying coins. Besides, you shall be housed like the gods, for we shall erect gables¹³⁴ over your dwellings; if you hold some public post and want to do a little pilfering, we will give you the sharp claws of a hawk. Are you dining in town, we will provide you with crops.¹³⁵ But, if your award is against us, don't fail to have metal covers fashioned for yourselves, like those they place over statues;¹³⁶ else, look out! for the day you wear a white tunic all the birds will soil it with their droppings.

Pisthetærus

Birds! the sacrifice is propitious. But I see no messenger coming from the wall to tell us what is happening. Ah! here comes one running himself out of breath as though he were running the Olympic stadium.

Messenger

Where, where is he? Where, where, where is he? Where, where, where is he? Where is Pisthetærus, our leader?

Pisthetærus

Here am I.

Messenger

The wall is finished.

Pisthetærus

That's good news.

Messenger

'Tis a most beautiful, a most magnificent work of art. The wall is so broad that Proxenides, the Braggartian, and Theogenes could pass each other in their chariots, even if they were drawn by steeds as big as the Trojan horse.

Pisthetærus

'Tis wonderful!

¹³² From Aphrodite (Venus), to whom he had awarded the apple, prize of beauty, in the contest of the "goddesses three."

¹³³ Laurium was an Athenian *deme* at the extremity of the Attic peninsula containing valuable silver mines, the revenues of which were largely employed in the maintenance of the fleet and payment of the crews. The "owls of Laurium," of course, mean pieces of money; the Athenian coinage was stamped with a representation of an owl, the bird of Athene.

¹³⁴ A pun, impossible to keep in English, on the two meanings of the Greek word which signifies both an eagle and the gable of a house or pediment of a temple.

¹³⁵ That is, birds' crops, into which they could stow away plenty of good things.

¹³⁶ The Ancients appear to have placed metal discs over statues standing in the open air, to save them from injury from the weather, etc.

Messenger

Its length is one hundred *stadia*; I measured it myself.

Pisthetærus

A decent length, by Posidon! And who built such a wall?

Messenger

Birds—birds only; they had neither Egyptian brickmaker, nor stone-mason, nor carpenter; the birds did it all themselves; I could hardly believe my eyes. Thirty thousand cranes came from Libya with a supply of stones,¹³⁷ intended for the foundations. The water-rails chiselled them with their beaks. Ten thousand storks were busy making bricks; plovers and other water fowl carried water into the air.

Pisthetærus

And who carried the mortar?

Messenger

Hérons, in hods.

Pisthetærus

But how could they put the mortar into hods?

Messenger

Oh! 'twas a truly clever invention; the geese used their feet like spades; they buried them in the pile of mortar and then emptied them into the hods.

Pisthetærus

Ah! to what use cannot feet be put?¹³⁸

Messenger

You should have seen how eagerly the ducks carried bricks. To complete the tale, the swallows came flying to the work, their beaks full of mortar and their trowel on their back, just the way little children are carried.

Pisthetærus

Who would want paid servants after this? But tell me, who did the woodwork?

Messenger

Birds again, and clever carpenters too, the pelicans, for they squared up the gates with their beaks in such a fashion that one would have thought they were using axes; the noise was just like a dockyard. Now the whole wall is tight everywhere, securely bolted and well guarded; it is patrolled, bell in hand; the sentinels stand everywhere and beacons burn on the towers. But I must run off to clean myself; the rest is your business.

Chorus

Well! what do you say to it? Are you not astonished at the wall being completed so quickly?

Pisthetærus

By the gods, yes, and with good reason. 'Tis really not to be believed. But here comes another messenger from the wall to bring us some further news! What a fighting look he has!

Second Messenger

Oh! oh! oh! oh! oh! oh!

¹³⁷ So as not to be carried away by the wind when crossing the sea, cranes are popularly supposed to ballast themselves with stones, which they carry in their beaks.

¹³⁸ Pisthetærus modifies the Greek proverbial saying, "To what use cannot hands be put?"

Pisthetærus

What's the matter?

Second Messenger

A horrible outrage has occurred; a god sent by Zeus has passed through our gates and has penetrated the realms of the air without the knowledge of the jays, who are on guard in the daytime.

Pisthetærus

'Tis an unworthy and criminal deed. What god was it?

Second Messenger

We don't know that. All we know is, that he has got wings.

Pisthetærus

Why were not guards sent against him at once?

Second Messenger

We have dispatched thirty thousand hawks of the legion of Mounted Archers.¹³⁹ All the hook-clawed birds are moving against him, the kestrel, the buzzard, the vulture, the great-horned owl; they cleave the air, so that it resounds with the flapping of their wings; they are looking everywhere for the god, who cannot be far away; indeed, if I mistake not, he is coming from yonder side.

Pisthetærus

All arm themselves with slings and bows! This way, all our soldiers; shoot and strike! Some one give me a sling!

Chorus

War, a terrible war is breaking out between us and the gods! Come, let each one guard Air, the son of Erebus,¹⁴⁰ in which the clouds float. Take care no immortal enters it without your knowledge. Scan all sides with your glance. Hark! methinks I can hear the rustle of the swift wings of a god from heaven.

Pisthetærus

Hi! you woman! where are you flying to? Halt, don't stir! Keep motionless! not a beat of your wing! —Who are you and from what country? You must say whence you come.¹⁴¹

Iris

I come from the abode of the Olympian gods.

Pisthetærus

What's your name, ship or cap?¹⁴²

Iris

I am swift Iris.

Pisthetærus

Paralus or Salaminia?¹⁴³

¹³⁹ A corps of Athenian cavalry was so named.

¹⁴⁰ Chaos, Night, Tartarus, and Erebus alone existed in the beginning; Eros was born from Night and Erebus, and he wedded Chaos and begot Earth, Air, and Heaven; so runs the fable.

¹⁴¹ Iris appears from the top of the stage and arrests her flight in mid-career.

¹⁴² Ship, because of her wings, which resemble oars; cap, because she no doubt wore the head-dress (as a messenger of the gods) with which Hermes is generally depicted.

¹⁴³ The names of the two sacred galleys which carried Athenian officials on State business.

Iris

What do you mean?

Pisthetærus

Let a buzzard rush at her and seize her.¹⁴⁴

Iris

Seize me! But what do all these insults mean?

Pisthetærus

Woe to you!

Iris

'Tis incomprehensible.

Pisthetærus

By which gate did you pass through the wall, wretched woman?

Iris

By which gate? Why, great gods, I don't know.

Pisthetærus

You hear how she holds us in derision. Did you present yourself to the officers in command of the jays? You don't answer. Have you a permit, bearing the seal of the storks?

Iris

Am I awake?

Pisthetærus

Did you get one?

Iris

Are you mad?

Pisthetærus

No head-bird gave you a safe-conduct?

Iris

A safe-conduct to me, you poor fool!

Pisthetærus

Ah! and so you slipped into this city on the sly and into these realms of air-land that don't belong to you.

Iris

And what other roads can the gods travel?

Pisthetærus

By Zeus! I know nothing about that, not I. But they won't pass this way. And you still dare to complain! Why, if you were treated according to your deserts, no Iris would ever have more justly suffered death.

Iris

I am immortal.

Pisthetærus

You would have died nevertheless. —Oh! 'twould be truly intolerable! What! should the

¹⁴⁴ A buzzard is named in order to raise a laugh, the Greek name also meaning, etymologically, provided with three testicles, vigorous in love.

universe obey us and the gods alone continue their insolence and not understand that they must submit to the law of the strongest in their due turn? But tell me, where are you flying to?

Iris

I? The messenger of Zeus to mankind, I am going to tell them to sacrifice sheep and oxen on the altars and to fill their streets with the rich smoke of burning fat.

Pisthetærus

Of which gods are you speaking?

Iris

Of which? Why, of ourselves, the gods of heaven.

Pisthetærus

You, gods?

Iris

Are there others then?

Pisthetærus

Men now adore the birds as gods, and 'tis to them, by Zeus, that they must offer sacrifices, and not to Zeus at all!

Iris

Oh! fool! fool! Rouse not the wrath of the gods, for 'tis terrible indeed. Armed with the brand of Zeus, Justice would annihilate your race; the lightning would strike you as it did Lycimnius and consume both your body and the porticos of your palace.¹⁴⁵

Pisthetærus

Here! that's enough tall talk. Just you listen and keep quiet! Do you take me for a Lydian or a Phrygian¹⁴⁶ and think to frighten me with your big words? Know, that if Zeus worries me again, I shall go at the head of my eagles, who are armed with lightning, and reduce his dwelling and that of Amphion to cinders.¹⁴⁷ I shall send more than six hundred porphyryions clothed in leopards' skins¹⁴⁸ up to heaven against him; and formerly a single Porphyryion gave him enough to do. As for you, his messenger, if you annoy me, I shall begin by stretching your legs asunder, and so conduct myself, Iris though you be, that despite my age, you will be astonished. I will show you something that will make you three times over.

Iris

May you perish, you wretch, you and your infamous words!

Pisthetærus

Won't you be off quickly? Come, stretch your wings or look out for squalls!

Iris

If my father does not punish you for your insults...

Pisthetærus

Ha!... but just you be off elsewhere to roast younger folk than us with your lightning.

¹⁴⁵ Iris' reply is a parody of the tragic style. —*Lycimnius* is, according to the scholiast, the title of a tragedy by Euripides, which is about a ship that is struck by lightning.

¹⁴⁶ *i.e.* for a poltroon, like the slaves, most of whom came to Athens from these countries.

¹⁴⁷ A parody of a passage in the lost tragedy of *Niobe* of Æschylus.

¹⁴⁸ Because this bird has a spotted plumage. —Porphyryion is also the name of one of the Titans who tried to storm heave.

Chorus

We forbid the gods, the sons of Zeus, to pass through our city and the mortals to send them the smoke of their sacrifices by this road.

Pisthetærus

'Tis odd that the messenger we sent to the mortals has never returned.

Herald

Oh! blessed Pisthetærus, very wise, very illustrious, very gracious, thrice happy, very...
Come, prompt me, somebody, do.

Pisthetærus

Get to your story!

Herald

All peoples are filled with admiration for your wisdom, and they award you this golden crown.

Pisthetærus

I accept it. But tell me, why do the people admire me?

Herald

Oh you, who have founded so illustrious a city in the air, you know not in what esteem men hold you and how many there are who burn with desire to dwell in it. Before your city was built, all men had a mania for Sparta; long hair and fasting were held in honour, men went dirty like Socrates and carried staves. Now all is changed. Firstly, as soon as 'tis dawn, they all spring out of bed together to go and seek their food, the same as you do; then they fly off towards the notices and finally devour the decrees. The bird-madness is so clear, that many actually bear the names of birds. There is a halting victualler, who styles himself the partridge; Menippus calls himself the swallow; Opuntius the one-eyed crow; Philocles the lark; Theogenes the fox-goose; Lycurgus the ibis; Chærephon the bat; Syracosius the magpie; Midias the quail;¹⁴⁹ indeed he looks like a quail that has been hit hard over the head. Out of love for the birds they repeat all the songs which concern the swallow, the teal, the goose or the pigeon; in each verse you see wings, or at all events a few feathers. This is what is happening down there. Finally, there are more than ten thousand folk who are coming here from earth to ask you for feathers and hooked claws; so, mind you supply yourself with wings for the immigrants.

Pisthetærus

Ah! by Zeus, 'tis not the time for idling. Go as quick as possible and fill every hamper, every basket you can find with wings. Manes¹⁵⁰ will bring them to me outside the walls, where I will welcome those who present themselves.

Chorus

This town will soon be inhabited by a crowd of men.

Pisthetærus

If fortune favours us.

Chorus

Folk are more and more delighted with it.

¹⁴⁹ All these surnames bore some relation to the character or the build of the individual to whom the poet applies them. —Chærephon, Socrates' disciple, was of white and ashen hue. —Opuntius was one-eyed. —Syracosius was a braggart. —Midias had a passion for quail-fights, and, besides, resembled that bird physically.

¹⁵⁰ Pisthetærus' servant, already mentioned.

Pisthetærus

Come, hurry up and bring them along.

Chorus

Will not man find here everything that can please him—wisdom, love, the divine Graces, the sweet face of gentle peace?

Pisthetærus

Oh! you lazy servant! won't you hurry yourself?

Chorus

Let a basket of wings be brought speedily. Come, beat him as I do, and put some life into him; he is as lazy as an ass.

Pisthetærus

Aye, Manes is a great craven.

Chorus

Begin by putting this heap of wings in order; divide them in three parts according to the birds from whom they came; the singing, the prophetic¹⁵¹ and the aquatic birds; then you must take care to distribute them to the men according to their character.

Pisthetærus (to Manes)

Oh! by the kestrels! I can keep my hands off you no longer; you are too slow and lazy altogether.

A Parricide¹⁵²

Oh! might I but become an eagle, who soars in the skies! Oh! might I fly above the azure waves of the barren sea!¹⁵³

Pisthetærus

Ha! 'twould seem the news was true; I hear someone coming who talks of wings.

Parricide

Nothing is more charming than to fly; I burn with desire to live under the same laws as the birds; I am bird-mad and fly towards you, for I want to live with you and to obey your laws.

Pisthetærus

Which laws? The birds have many laws.

Parricide

All of them; but the one that pleases me most is, that among the birds it is considered a fine thing to peck and strangle one's father.

Pisthetærus

Aye, by Zeus! according to us, he who dares to strike his father, while still a chick, is a brave fellow.

Parricide

And therefore I want to dwell here, for I want to strangle my father and inherit his wealth.

Pisthetærus

But we have also an ancient law written in the code of the storks, which runs thus, "When the

¹⁵¹ From the inspection of which auguries were taken, e.g. the eagles, the vultures, the crows.

¹⁵² Or rather, a young man who contemplated parricide.

¹⁵³ A parody of verses in Sophocles' *Oenomaus*

stork father has reared his young and has taught them to fly, the young must in their turn support the father."

Parricide

'Tis hardly worth while coming all this distance to be compelled to keep my father!

Pisthetærus

No, no, young friend, since you have come to us with such willingness, I am going to give you these black wings, as though you were an orphan bird; furthermore, some good advice, that I received myself in infancy. Don't strike your father, but take these wings in one hand and these spurs in the other; imagine you have a cock's crest on your head and go and mount guard and fight; live on your pay and respect your father's life. You're a gallant fellow! Very well, then! Fly to Thrace and fight.¹⁵⁴

Parricide

By Bacchus! 'Tis well spoken; I will follow your counsel.

Pisthetærus

'Tis acting wisely, by Zeus.

Cinesias¹⁵⁵

"On my light pinions I soar off to Olympus; in its capricious flight my Muse flutters along the thousand paths of poetry in turn..."

Pisthetærus

This is a fellow will need a whole shipload of wings.

Cinesias (singing)

"...and being fearless and vigorous, it is seeking fresh outlet."

Pisthetærus

Welcome, Cinesias, you lime-wood man!¹⁵⁶ Why have you come here a-twisting your game leg in circles?

Cinesias

"I want to become a bird, a tuneful nightingale."

Pisthetærus

Enough of that sort of ditty. Tell me what you want.

Cinesias

Give me wings and I will fly into the topmost airs to gather fresh songs in the clouds, in the midst of the vapours and the fleecy snow.

Pisthetærus

Gather songs in the clouds?

Cinesias

'Tis on them the whole of our latter-day art depends. The most brilliant dithyrambs are those that flap their wings in void space and are clothed in mist and dense obscurity. To appreciate this, just listen.

¹⁵⁴ The Athenians were then besieging Amphipolis in the Thracian Chalcidice .

¹⁵⁵ There was a real Cinesias—a dythyrambic poet born at Thebes.

¹⁵⁶ The scholiast thinks that Cinesias, who was tall and slight of build, wore a kind of corset of lime-wood to support his waist—surely rather a far-fetched interpretation!

Pisthetærus

Oh! no, no, no!

Cinesias

By Hermes! but indeed you shall. "I shall travel through thine ethereal empire like a winged bird, who cleaveth space with his long neck..."

Pisthetærus

Stop! easy all, I say!¹⁵⁷

Cinesias

"...as I soar over the seas, carried by the breath of the winds..."

Pisthetærus

By Zeus! but I'll cut your breath short.

Cinesias

"...now rushing along the tracks of Notus, now nearing Boreas across the infinite wastes of the ether." (*Pisthetærus beats him.*) Ah! old man, that's a pretty and clever idea truly!

Pisthetærus

What! are you not delighted to be cleaving the air?¹⁵⁸

Cinesias

To treat a dithyrambic poet, for whom the tribes dispute with each other, in this style!¹⁵⁹

Pisthetærus

Will you stay with us and form a chorus of winged birds as slender as Leotrophides¹⁶⁰ for the Cecropid tribe?

Cinesias

You are making game of me, 'tis clear; but know that I shall never leave you in peace if I do not have wings wherewith to traverse the air.

An Informer

What are these birds with downy feathers, who look so pitiable to me? Tell me, oh swallow with the long dappled wings.¹⁶¹

Pisthetærus

Oh! but 'tis a regular invasion that threatens us. Here comes another of them, humming along.

Informer

Swallow with the long dappled wings, once more I summon you.

Pisthetærus

It's his cloak I believe he's addressing; 'faith, it stands in great need of the swallows' return.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ The Greek word used here was the word of command employed to stop the rowers.

¹⁵⁸ Cinesias makes a bound each time that Pisthetærus strikes him.

¹⁵⁹ The tribes of Athens, or rather the rich citizens belonging to them, were wont on feast-days to give representations of dithyrambic choruses as well as of tragedies and comedies.

¹⁶⁰ Another dithyrambic poet, a man of extreme leanness.

¹⁶¹ A parody of a hemistich from *Alcæus*. —The informer is dissatisfied at only seeing birds of sombre plumage and poor appearance. He would have preferred to denounce the rich.

¹⁶² The informer, says the scholiast, was clothed with a ragged cloak, the tatters of which hung down like wings, in fact, a cloak that could not protect him from the cold and must have made him long for the swallows' return, i.e. the spring.

Informer

Where is he who gives out wings to all comers?

Pisthetærus

'Tis I, but you must tell me for what purpose you want them.

Informer

Ask no questions. I want wings, and wings I must have.

Pisthetærus

Do you want to fly straight to Pellene?¹⁶³

Informer

I? Why, I am an accuser of the islands,¹⁶⁴ an informer...

Pisthetærus

A fine trade, truly!

Informer

...a hatcher of lawsuits. Hence I have great need of wings to prowl round the cities and drag them before justice.

Pisthetærus

Would you do this better if you had wings?

Informer

No, but I should no longer fear the pirates; I should return with the cranes, loaded with a supply of lawsuits by way of ballast.

Pisthetærus

So it seems, despite all your youthful vigour, you make it your trade to denounce strangers?

Informer

Well, and why not? I don't know how to dig.

Pisthetærus

But, by Zeus! there are honest ways of gaining a living at your age without all this infamous trickery.

Informer

My friend, I am asking you for wings, not for words.

Pisthetærus

'Tis just my words that give you wings.

Informer

And how can you give a man wings with your words?

Pisthetærus

'Tis thus that all first start.

Informer

All?

Pisthetærus

Have you not often heard the father say to young men in the barbers' shops, "It's astonishing

¹⁶³ A town in Achaia, where woollen cloaks were made.

¹⁶⁴ His trade was to accuse the rich citizens of the subject islands, and drag them before the Athenian court; he explains later the special advantages of this branch of the informer's business.

how Diitrephes' advice has made my son fly to horse-riding." —"Mine," says another, "has flown towards tragic poetry on the wings of his imagination."

Informer

So that words give wings?

Pisthetærus

Undoubtedly; words give wings to the mind and make a man soar to heaven. Thus I hope that my wise words will give you wings to fly to some less degrading trade.

Informer

But I do not want to.

Pisthetærus

What do you reckon on doing then?

Informer

I won't belie my breeding; from generation to generation we have lived by informing. Quick, therefore, give me quickly some light, swift hawk or kestrel wings, so that I may summon the islanders, sustain the accusation here, and haste back there again on flying pinions.

Pisthetærus

I see. In this way the stranger will be condemned even before he appears.

Informer

That's just it.

Pisthetærus

And while he is on his way here by sea, you will be flying to the islands to despoil him of his property.

Informer

You've hit it, precisely; I must whirl hither and thither like a perfect humming-top.

Pisthetærus

I catch the idea. Wait, i' faith, I've got some fine Corcyræan wings.¹⁶⁵ How do you like them?

Informer

Oh! woe is me! Why, 'tis a whip!

Pisthetærus

No, no; these are the wings, I tell you, that set the top a-spinning.

Informer

Oh! oh! oh!

Pisthetærus

Take your flight, clear off, you miserable cur, or you will soon see what comes of quibbling and lying. Come, let us gather up our wings and withdraw.

Chorus

In my ethereal flights I have seen many things new and strange and wondrous beyond belief. There is a tree called Cleonymus belonging to an unknown species; it has no heart, is good for nothing and is as tall as it is cowardly. In springtime it shoots forth calumnies instead of buds and in autumn it strews the ground with bucklers in place of leaves.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ That is, whips—Corcyra being famous for these articles

¹⁶⁶ Cleonymous is a standing butt of Aristophanes' wit, both as an informer and a notorious poltroon.

Far away in the regions of darkness, where no ray of light ever enters, there is a country, where men sit at the table of the heroes and dwell with them always—save always in the evening. Should any mortal meet the hero Orestes at night, he would soon be stripped and covered with blows from head to foot.¹⁶⁷

Prometheus

Ah! by the gods! if only Zeus does not espy me! Where is Pisthetærus?

Pisthetærus

Ha! what is this? A masked man!

Prometheus

Can you see any god behind me?

Pisthetærus

No, none. But who are you, pray?

Prometheus

What's the time, please?

Pisthetærus

The time? Why, it's past noon. Who are you?

Prometheus

Is it the fall of day? Is it no later than that?¹⁶⁸

Pisthetærus

Oh! 'pon my word! but you grow tiresome.

Prometheus

What is Zeus doing? Is he dispersing the clouds or gathering them?¹⁶⁹

Pisthetærus

Take care, lest I lose all patience.

Prometheus

Come, I will raise my mask.

Pisthetærus

Ah! my dear Prometheus!

Prometheus

Stop! stop! speak lower!

Pisthetærus

Why, what's the matter, Prometheus?

Prometheus

H'sh! h'sh! Don't call me by my name; you will be my ruin, if Zeus should see me here. But, if you want me to tell you how things are going in heaven, take this umbrella and shield me, so that the gods don't see me.

¹⁶⁷ In allusion to the cave of the bandit Orestes; the poet terms him a hero only because of his heroic name Orestes.

¹⁶⁸ Prometheus wants night to come and so reduce the risk of being seen from Olympus.

¹⁶⁹ The clouds would prevent Zeus seeing what was happening below him.

Pisthetærus

I can recognize Prometheus in this cunning trick. Come, quick then, and fear nothing; speak on.

Prometheus

Then listen.

Pisthetærus

I am listening, proceed!

Prometheus

It's all over with Zeus.

Pisthetærus

Ah! and since when, pray?

Prometheus

Since you founded this city in the air. There is not a man who now sacrifices to the gods; the smoke of the victims no longer reaches us. Not the smallest offering comes! We fast as though it were the festival of Demeter.¹⁷⁰ The barbarian gods, who are dying of hunger, are bawling like Illyrians¹⁷¹ and threaten to make an armed descent upon Zeus, if he does not open markets where joints of the victims are sold.

Pisthetærus

What! there are other gods besides you, barbarian gods who dwell above Olympus?

Prometheus

If there were no barbarian gods, who would be the patron of Execestides?¹⁷²

Pisthetærus

And what is the name of these gods?

Prometheus

Their name? Why, the Triballi.¹⁷³

Pisthetærus

Ah, indeed! 'tis from that no doubt that we derive the word 'tribulation.'¹⁷⁴

Prometheus

Most likely. But one thing I can tell you for certain, namely, that Zeus and the celestial Triballi are going to send deputies here to sue for peace. Now don't you treat, unless Zeus restores the sceptre to the birds and gives you Basileia¹⁷⁵ in marriage.

Pisthetærus

Who is this Basileia?

Prometheus

A very fine young damsel, who makes the lightning for Zeus; all things come from her, wisdom, good laws, virtue, the fleet, calumnies, the public paymaster and the *triobolus*.

¹⁷⁰ The third day of the festival of Demeter was a fast.

¹⁷¹ A semi-savage people, addicted to violence and brigandage.

¹⁷² Who, being reputed a stranger despite his pretension to the title of a citizen, could only have a strange god for his patron or tutelary deity.

¹⁷³ The Triballi were a Thracian people; it was a term commonly used in Athens to describe coarse men, obscene debauchees and greedy parasites.

¹⁷⁴ There is a similar pun in the Greek.

¹⁷⁵ *i.e.* the 'supremacy' of Greece, the real object of the war.

Pisthetærus

Ah! then she is a sort of general manageress to the god.

Prometheus

Yes, precisely. If he gives you her for your wife, yours will be the almighty power. That is what I have come to tell you; for you know my constant and habitual goodwill towards men.

Pisthetærus

Oh, yes! 'tis thanks to you that we roast our meat.¹⁷⁶

Prometheus

I hate the gods, as you know.

Pisthetærus

Aye, by Zeus, you have always detested them.

Prometheus

Towards them I am a veritable Timon;¹⁷⁷ but I must return in all haste, so give me the umbrella; if Zeus should see me from up there, he would think I was escorting one of the Canephoroi.¹⁷⁸

Pisthetærus

Wait, take this stool as well.

Chorus

Near by the land of the Sciapodes¹⁷⁹ there is a marsh, from the borders whereof the odious Socrates evokes the souls of men. Pisander¹⁸⁰ came one day to see his soul, which he had left there when still alive. He offered a little victim, a camel,¹⁸¹ slit his throat and, following the example of Ulysses, stepped one pace backwards.¹⁸² Then that bat of a Chærephon¹⁸³ came up from hell to drink the camel's blood.

Posidon¹⁸⁴

This is the city of Nephelococcygia, Cloud-cuckoo-town, whither we come as ambassadors. (*To Triballus*) Hi! what are you up to? you are throwing your cloak over the left shoulder. Come, fling it quick over the right! And why, pray, does it draggle in this fashion? Have you

¹⁷⁶ Prometheus had stolen the fire from the gods to gratify mankind.

¹⁷⁷ A celebrated misanthrope, contemporary to Aristophanes. Hating the society of men, he had only a single friend, Apimantus, to whom he was attached, because of their similarity of character; he also liked Alcibiades, because he foresaw that this young man would be the ruin of his country.

¹⁷⁸ The Canephoroi were young maidens, chosen from the first families of the city, who carried baskets wreathed with myrtle at the feast of Athene, while at those of Bacchus and Demeter they appeared with gilded baskets. — The daughters of 'Metics,' or resident aliens, walked behind them, carrying an umbrella and a stool.

¹⁷⁹ According to Ctesias, the Sciapodes were a people who dwelt on the borders of the Atlantic. Their feet were larger than the rest of their bodies, and to shield themselves from the sun's rays they held up one of their feet as an umbrella. — By giving the Socratic philosophers the name of Sciapodes here Aristophanes wishes to convey that they are walking in the dark and busying themselves with the greatest nonsense.

¹⁸⁰ This Pisander was a notorious coward; for this reason the poet jestingly supposes that he had lost his soul, the seat of courage.

¹⁸¹ Considering the shape and height of the camel, [it] can certainly not be included in the list of *small* victims, e.g. the sheep and the goat.

¹⁸² In the evocation of the dead, Book XI of the *Odyssey*.

¹⁸³ Chærephon was given this same title by the Herald earlier in this comedy. — Aristophanes supposes him to have come from hell because he is lean and pallid.

¹⁸⁴ Posidon appears on the stage accompanied by Heracles and a Triballian god.

ulcers to hide like Læspodias?¹⁸⁵ Oh! democracy!¹⁸⁶ whither, oh! whither are you leading us?
Is it possible that the gods have chosen such an envoy?

Triballus

Leave me alone.

Posidon

Ugh! the cursed savage! you are by far the most barbarous of all the gods. —Tell me, Heracles, what are we going to do?

Heracles

I have already told you that I want to strangle the fellow who has dared to block us in.

Posidon

But, my friend, we are envoys of peace.

Heracles

All the more reason why I wish to strangle him.

Pisthetærus

Hand me the cheese-grater; bring me the silphium for sauce; pass me the cheese and watch the coals.¹⁸⁷

Heracles

Mortal! we who greet you are three gods.

Pisthetærus

Wait a bit till I have prepared my silphium pickle.

Heracles

What are these meats?¹⁸⁸

Pisthetærus

These are birds that have been punished with death for attacking the people's friends.

Heracles

And you are seasoning them before answering us?

Pisthetærus

Ah! Heracles! welcome, welcome! What's the matter?¹⁸⁹

Heracles

The gods have sent us here as ambassadors to treat for peace.

A Servant

There's no more oil in the flask.

Pisthetærus

And yet the birds must be thoroughly basted with it.¹⁹⁰

Heracles

We have no interest to serve in fighting you; as for you, be friends and we promise that you

¹⁸⁵ An Athenian general. —Neptune is trying to give Triballus some notions of elegance and good behaviour.

¹⁸⁶ Aristophanes supposes that democracy is in the ascendant in Olympus as it is in Athens.

¹⁸⁷ He is addressing his servant, Manes.

¹⁸⁸ Heracles softens at sight of the food. —Heracles is the glutton of the comic poets.

¹⁸⁹ He pretends not to have seen them at first, being so much engaged with his cookery.

¹⁹⁰ He pretends to forget the presence of the ambassadors.

shall always have rain-water in your pools and the warmest of warm weather. So far as these points go we are armed with plenary authority.

Pisthetærus

We have never been the aggressors, and even now we are as well disposed for peace as yourselves, provided you agree to one equitable condition, namely, that Zeus yield his sceptre to the birds. If only this is agreed to, I invite the ambassadors to dinner.

Heracles

That's good enough for me. I vote for peace.

Posidon

You wretch! you are nothing but a fool and a glutton. Do you want to dethrone your own father?

Pisthetærus

What an error! Why, the gods will be much more powerful if the birds govern the earth. At present the mortals are hidden beneath the clouds, escape your observation, and commit perjury in your name; but if you had the birds for your allies, and a man, after having sworn by the crow and Zeus, should fail to keep his oath, the crow would dive down upon him unawares and pluck out his eye.

Posidon

Well thought of, by Posidon!¹⁹¹

Heracles

My notion too.

Pisthetærus (to Triballus)

And you, what's your opinion?

Triballus

*Nabaisatreu.*¹⁹²

Pisthetærus

D'you see? he also approves. But hear another thing in which we can serve you. If a man vows to offer a sacrifice to some god, and then procrastinates, pretending that the gods can wait, and thus does not keep his word, we shall punish his stinginess.

Posidon

Ah! ah! and how?

Pisthetærus

While he is counting his money or is in the bath, a kite will relieve him, before he knows it, either in coin or in clothes, of the value of a couple of sheep, and carry it to the god.

Heracles

I vote for restoring them the sceptre.

Posidon

Ask the Triballian.

Heracles

Hi Triballian, do you want a thrashing?

¹⁹¹ Posidon jestingly swears by himself.

¹⁹² The barbarian god utters some gibberish which Pisthetærus interprets into consent.

Triballus

Saunaka baktarikrousa.

Heracles

He says, "Right willingly."

Posidon

If that be the opinion of both of you, why, I consent too.

Heracles

Very well! we accord the sceptre.

Pisthetærus

Ah! I was nearly forgetting another condition. I will leave Here to Zeus, but only if the young Basileia is given me in marriage.

Posidon

Then you don't want peace. Let us withdraw.

Pisthetærus

It matters mighty little to me. Cook, look to the gravy.

Heracles

What an odd fellow this Posidon is! Where are you off to? Are we going to war about a woman?

Posidon

What else is there to do?

Heracles

What else? Why, conclude peace.

Posidon

Oh! you ninny! do you always want to be fooled? Why, you are seeking your own downfall. If Zeus were to die, after having yielded them the sovereignty, you would be ruined, for you are the heir of all the wealth he will leave behind.

Pisthetærus

Oh! by the gods! how he is cajoling you. Step aside, that I may have a word with you. Your uncle is getting the better of you, my poor friend.¹⁹³ The law will not allow you an *obolus* of the paternal property, for you are a bastard and not a legitimate child.

Heracles

I a bastard! What's that you tell me?

Pisthetærus

Why, certainly; are you not born of a stranger woman? Besides, is not Athene recognized as Zeus' sole heiress? And no daughter would be that, if she had a legitimate brother.

Heracles

But what if my father wished to give me his property on his death-bed, even though I be a bastard?

Pisthetærus

The law forbids it, and this same Posidon would be the first to lay claim to his wealth, in virtue of being his legitimate brother. Listen; thus runs Solon's law: "A bastard shall not

¹⁹³ Heracles, the god of strength, was far from being remarkable in the way of cleverness.

inherit, if there are legitimate children; and if there are no legitimate children, the property shall pass to the nearest kin."¹⁹⁴

Heracles

And I get nothing whatever of the paternal property?

Pisthetærus

Absolutely nothing. But tell me, has your father had you entered on the registers of his *phratría*?¹⁹⁵

Heracles

No, and I have long been surprised at the omission.

Pisthetærus

What ails you, that you should shake your fist at heaven? Do you want to fight it? Why, be on my side, I will make you a king and will feed you on bird's milk and honey.

Heracles

Your further condition seems fair to me. I cede you the young damsel.

Posidon

But I, I vote against this opinion.

Pisthetærus

Then it all depends on the Triballian. (*to Triballus.*) *What do you say?*

Triballus

Big bird give daughter pretty and queen.

Heracles

You say that you give her?

Posidon

Why no, he does not say anything of the sort, that he gives her; else I cannot understand any better than the swallows.

Pisthetærus

Exactly so. Does he not say she must be given to the swallows?

Posidon

Very well! you two arrange the matter; make peace, since you wish it so; I'll hold my tongue.

Heracles

We are of a mind to grant you all that you ask. But come up there with us to receive Basileia and the celestial bounty.

Pisthetærus

Here are birds already cut up, and very suitable for a nuptial feast.

Heracles

You go and, if you like, I will stay here to roast them.

Pisthetærus

You to roast them! you are too much the glutton; come along with us.

¹⁹⁴ This was Athenian law.

¹⁹⁵ The poet attributes to the gods the same customs as those which governed Athens, and according to which no child was looked upon as legitimate unless his father had entered him on the registers of his *phratría*. The *phratría* was a division of the tribe and consisted of thirty families.

Heracles

Ah! how well I would have treated myself!

Pisthetærus

Let someone bring me a beautiful and magnificent tunic for the wedding.

Chorus¹⁹⁶

At Phanæ,¹⁹⁷ near the Clepsydra,¹⁹⁸ there dwells a people who have neither faith nor law, the Englottogastors,¹⁹⁹ who reap, sow, pluck the vines and the figs²⁰⁰ with their tongues; they belong to a barbaric race, and among them the Philippi and the Gorgiases²⁰¹ are to be found; 'tis these Englottogastorian Philippi who introduced the custom all over Attica of cutting out the tongue separately at sacrifices.²⁰²

A Messenger

Oh, you, whose unbounded happiness I cannot express in words, thrice happy race of airy birds, receive your king in your fortunate dwellings. More brilliant than the brightest star that illumines the earth, he is approaching his glittering golden palace; the sun itself does not shine with more dazzling glory. He is entering with his bride at his side,²⁰³ whose beauty no human tongue can express; in his hand he brandishes the lightning, the winged shaft of Zeus; perfumes of unspeakable sweetness pervade the ethereal realms. 'Tis a glorious spectacle to see the clouds of incense wafting in light whirlwinds before the breath of the Zephyr! But here he is himself. Divine Muse! let thy sacred lips begin with songs of happy omen.

Chorus

Fall back! to the right! to the left! advance!²⁰⁴ Fly around this happy mortal, whom Fortune loads with her blessings. Oh! oh! what grace! what beauty! Oh, marriage so auspicious for our city! All honour to this man! 'tis through him that the birds are called to such glorious destinies. Let your nuptial hymns, your nuptial songs, greet him and his Basileia! 'Twas in the midst of such festivities that the Fates formerly united Olympian Here to the King who governs the gods from the summit of his inaccessible throne. Oh! Hymen! oh! Hymenæus! Rosy Eros with the golden wings held the reins and guided the chariot; 'twas he, who presided over the union of Zeus and the fortunate Here. Oh! Hymen! oh! Hymenæus!

Pisthetærus

I am delighted with your songs, I applaud your verses. Now celebrate the thunder that shakes the earth, the flaming lightning of Zeus and the terrible flashing thunderbolt.

Chorus

Oh, thou golden flash of the lightning! oh, ye divine shafts of flame, that Zeus has hitherto shot forth! Oh, ye rolling thunders, that bring down the rain! 'Tis by the order of *our* king that ye shall now stagger the earth! Oh, Hymen! 'tis through thee that he commands the universe

¹⁹⁶ The chorus continues to tell what it has seen on its flights.

¹⁹⁷ The harbour of the island of Chios; but this name is here used in the sense of being the land of informers (from the Greek for 'to denounce').

¹⁹⁸ *i.e.* near the orators' platform, in the Public Assembly, or because there stood the water-clock, by which speeches were limited.

¹⁹⁹ A coined name, made up of the Greek for the tongue, and [for] the stomach, and meaning those who fill their stomach with what they gain with their tongues, to wit, the orators.

²⁰⁰ The Greek for *a fig* forms part of the word which in Greek means an informer.

²⁰¹ Both rhetoricians.

²⁰² Because they consecrated it specially to the god of eloquence.

²⁰³ Basileia, whom he brings back from heaven.

²⁰⁴ Terms used in regulating a dance.

and that he makes Basileia, whom he has robbed from Zeus, take her seat at his side. Oh! Hymen! oh! Hymenæus!

Pisthetærus

Let all the winged tribes of our fellow-citizens follow the bridal couple to the palace of Zeus²⁰⁵ and to the nuptial couch! Stretch forth your hands, my dear wife! Take hold of me by my wings and let us dance; I am going to lift you up and carry you through the air.

Chorus

Oh, joy! Io Pæan! Tralala! victory is thing, oh, thou greatest of the gods!

THE END

²⁰⁵ Where Pisthetærus is henceforth to reign.