Birds

ARISTOPHANES

c. 446–386 BC

Birds

Ὄρνιθες

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited

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Birds · Aristophanes (c. 446–386 BC)

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INTRODUCTION

Two Athenians, Peisetaerus and Euelpides, have had enough of Athens and its endless lawsuits. Guided by a jackdaw and a crow, they set off to find Tereus, the king who was turned into a hoopoe, and ask him where to live. Then Peisetaerus has a better idea: the birds should build a city in the sky, between heaven and earth, and cut the gods off from the smoke of men's sacrifices.

The birds are won over, and Cloudcuckooland rises in the air. At once the hangers-on of any new city arrive—a poet, an oracle-monger, the astronomer Meton, an inspector, a decree-seller, an informer—and Peisetaerus drives them off one after another, while the hungry gods send envoys to bargain.

Aristophanes staged Birds at the Dionysia of 414 BC, while Athens' great expedition was away in Sicily. It is his longest surviving play and his most extravagant fantasy, with some of the loveliest songs in Greek comedy.

Birds

A wild, rocky place far from Athens, where the birds build Cloudcuckooland, their city in the sky.

PROLOGUE

Two Athenians fed up with Athens find the Hoopoe, and Peisetaerus hatches a plan for a city of birds.

EUELPIDES [1] Straight ahead, you say? Where that tree is?

PEISETAERUS [2] Oh, go burst! And now this one's cawing back again.

EUELPIDES [3] Why are we wandering up and down like this, you idiot? We'll be done for, trudging back and forth on this road for nothing.

PEISETAERUS [5] To think that I, poor fool, took a crow's word for it and walked around in circles for more than a hundred miles!

EUELPIDES [7] And I, poor devil, took a jackdaw's word for it and wore the nails right off my toes.

PEISETAERUS [9] I don't even know where on earth we are anymore.

EUELPIDES [10] Could you find your way back home from here?

PEISETAERUS [11] By Zeus, not even Execestides could, from here.[1]

EUELPIDES [12] Oh no.

PEISETAERUS You go along this road, my friend.

1 Execestides, mocked as a foreigner who had wormed his way into Athenian citizenship: a man who could find himself a homeland anywhere.

EUELPIDES [13] That crazy Philocrates, the bird-dealer in the market, has really done us dirty. He told us these two would show us the way to Tereus, the hoopoe, the one who became a bird from among the birds. And he sold us this one, Tharreleides' son the jackdaw, for an obol, and that one for three. And it turns out all they know how to do is bite. And now what are you gaping at? Is there anywhere further down the rocks you still want to take us? There's no road here.[2]

PEISETAERUS [22] No, by Zeus, there isn't a path here anywhere.

EUELPIDES [23] And the crow—doesn't she say anything about the way?

PEISETAERUS [24] By Zeus, she's not cawing the same thing she was before.

EUELPIDES [25] So what is she saying about the way?

PEISETAERUS What else but that she's going to gnaw my fingers off?

EUELPIDES [27] Isn't it awful? Here we are, dying to go to the crows, all packed and ready, and then we can't find the way! You see, gentlemen of the audience, we're suffering from the opposite disease to Sacas. He isn't a citizen and he forces his way in; while we, respected in tribe and clan, citizens among citizens, with nobody shooing us off, have taken flight from our country on both feet. Not that we hate the city itself—as if it weren't great by nature, and blessed, and open to absolutely everyone... to pay fines in.[3] [39] Cicadas, you see, sing in the branches for a month or two, but the Athenians sing in the law courts all their lives long. That's why we're making this trek. With a basket, a pot and some myrtle branches we wander around looking for a place without hassle, where we can settle down and live out our days. Our

2 Philocrates sold birds in the Athenian market. Tharreleides' son, Asopodorus, was a little man nicknamed "Jackdaw."

3 "Go to the crows" (es korakas) was the Athenian "go to hell." Sacas is the tragic poet Acestor, mocked as a foreigner passing himself off as a citizen.

journey's to Tereus, the hoopoe: we need to find out from him whether he's seen a city like that anywhere he's flown.[4]

PEISETAERUS [49] Hey!

EUELPIDES What is it?

PEISETAERUS My crow's been pointing up at something for a while now.

EUELPIDES [50] And this jackdaw here is gaping upward as if he's showing me something. There must be birds here, no question. We'll find out soon enough if we make some noise.

PEISETAERUS [54] You know what to do? Kick the rock with your leg.

EUELPIDES [55] And you bang it with your head, so the noise is twice as loud.

PEISETAERUS [56] Well, pick up a stone and knock.

EUELPIDES Sure, if you like. Boy! Boy!

PEISETAERUS [57] What are you saying, you? Calling the hoopoe "boy"? Instead of "boy," shouldn't you be calling "Epopoi"?

EUELPIDES [59] Epopoi! You're going to make me knock all over again! Epopoi!

HOOPOE'S SERVANT [60] Who are these two? Who's that shouting for the master?

EUELPIDES [61] Apollo, Averter of Evil, what a gaping beak!

HOOPOE'S SERVANT [62] Oh no, poor me—these two are bird-catchers!

EUELPIDES [63] What a horrible thing to say! Couldn't you put it more nicely?

HOOPOE'S SERVANT [64] You're both dead.

EUELPIDES But we're not humans.

HOOPOE'S SERVANT What are you, then?

---

4 Basket, pot and myrtle were the gear for the sacrifice made when founding a new settlement.

EUELPIDES [65] Me? I'm a Scaredy-Bird, a Libyan species.

HOOPOE'S SERVANT [66] Nonsense.

EUELPIDES Well then, ask what's at my feet.

HOOPOE'S SERVANT [67] And this one—what bird is he? Won't you tell me?

PEISETAERUS [68] Me? I'm a Shat-Myself—a pheasant.[5]

EUELPIDES [69] But you—what kind of creature are you, for the gods' sake?

HOOPOE'S SERVANT [70] Me? I'm a slave bird.

EUELPIDES Beaten by some rooster, were you?

HOOPOE'S SERVANT [71] No—when my master became a hoopoe, he prayed that I'd become a bird too, so he'd have someone to wait on him.

EUELPIDES [74] What, a bird needs a servant?

HOOPOE'S SERVANT [75] This one does, since I suppose he was a man once. Sometimes he's dying for some Phaleron anchovies: I grab the dish and run for anchovies. Or he fancies pea soup, and that needs a ladle and a pot: I run for the ladle.

EUELPIDES [79] A running bird—a trochilus, this one! You know what you should do, Runner? Call your master for us.[6]

HOOPOE'S SERVANT [81] But, by Zeus, he's only just dropped off, after a meal of myrtle berries and a few gnats.

EUELPIDES [83] Wake him up anyway.

HOOPOE'S SERVANT I know perfectly well he'll be annoyed, but I'll wake him for your sake.

PEISETAERUS [85] Damn you to hell, you scared me to death!

EUELPIDES [86] Oh no, damn it, my jackdaw's gone too—fright!

5 Mock bird names: Hypodediōs, "Scared Stiff," and Epikechodōs, "Shat Himself." "Phasian," from Phasis on the Black Sea, is the pheasant.
6 Trochilos, a small bird, sounds like trechō, "I run."

PEISETAERUS [87] You absolute coward of a creature, you were so scared you let go of the jackdaw?

EUELPIDES [88] Tell me, didn't you let go of the crow when you fell over?

PEISETAERUS [90] No, by Zeus, not me.

EUELPIDES Then where is she?

PEISETAERUS She flew away.

EUELPIDES [91] So you didn't let her go! My good man, how brave you are.

HOOPOE [92] Open up the woods, so I may come forth at last.

EUELPIDES [93] Heracles! What on earth is this creature? What plumage! And what's the idea of the triple crest?

HOOPOE [95] Who are they who seek me?

EUELPIDES Looks like the twelve gods have done you over.

HOOPOE [96] You're not mocking me, are you, at the sight of my plumage? I was once, strangers, a man.

EUELPIDES [98] We're not laughing at you.

HOOPOE At what, then?

EUELPIDES [99] It's your beak we find funny.

HOOPOE [100] That's exactly how Sophocles mangles me, Tereus, in his tragedies.[7]

EUELPIDES [102] You're Tereus? So are you a bird, or a peacock?

HOOPOE [103] A bird, that's me.

EUELPIDES Then where are your feathers?

HOOPOE [104] They've fallen out.

EUELPIDES From some disease?

HOOPOE [105] No—all we birds molt over the winter, and then we grow new ones. But tell me, who are you two?

7 In Sophocles' lost *Tereus*, the Thracian king Tereus, who had raped his wife Procne's sister, was turned into a hoopoe and Procne into a nightingale.

EUELPIDES [107] Us? Mortals.

HOOPOE [108] Of what people?

EUELPIDES From where the beautiful warships come.

HOOPOE [109] Jurymen, then?

EUELPIDES No, the other sort: jury-dodgers.[8]

HOOPOE [110] Does that seed get sown there?

EUELPIDES [111] If you hunt out in the countryside, you might find a little.

HOOPOE [112] And what do you two want, coming here?

EUELPIDES [113] We want to talk with you.

HOOPOE [114] About what?

EUELPIDES Because first of all you were a man once, like us; and you owed money once, like us; and you loved not paying it back, like us. Then you changed into the nature of a bird, and flew all around over land and sea, and you know everything a man knows and everything a bird knows. So that's why we've come to you here as suppliants: to ask if you could tell us of some city that's nice and woolly, like a soft blanket to curl up in.

HOOPOE [123] So you're looking for a city greater than that of the Cranaans?[9]

EUELPIDES [124] Not greater at all—just one that suits us better.

HOOPOE [125] Clearly you're after an aristocracy.

EUELPIDES Me? Not in the least. I can't stand Scellias' son.[10]

HOOPOE [127] Then what sort of city would you most like to live in?

EUELPIDES [128] One where the biggest troubles were like this: a friend comes to my door first thing in the morning and says, "By Olympian Zeus, make sure you come over to my place, you and

8 Athens' courts were filled by hundreds of paid citizen jurors (heliasts); jury duty was a notorious Athenian passion.
9 Cranaus, a legendary king of Athens; "Cranaans" is a poetic name for Athenians.
10 Scellias' son was Aristocrates, a leading Athenian: the joke is on his name.

the kids, nice and early, all freshly bathed—I'm giving a wedding feast. Don't you dare do anything else. If you do, don't come to me when I'm in trouble!"

HOOPOE [135] By Zeus, you certainly love your hardships! And what about you?

PEISETAERUS [136] I love the same sort of thing.

HOOPOE Such as?

PEISETAERUS [137] Where the father of a pretty boy bumps into me and complains as if I'd done him wrong: "A fine way to treat me, Stilbonides! You met my son coming back from the gym, fresh from his bath, and you didn't kiss him, didn't speak to him, didn't give him a hug, didn't feel his balls—and you an old friend of the family!"

HOOPOE [143] You poor little wretch, what troubles you're in love with! Well, there is a happy city of the kind you two describe, on the Red Sea.

EUELPIDES [145] Oh no, not by the sea, please—where the *Salaminia* will pop up one morning with a summons-server on board! Can you tell us of a Greek city?[11]

HOOPOE [149] Why don't you two go and settle in Lepreus, in Elis?

EUELPIDES [150] Because, by the gods, without ever having seen it I loathe Lepreus—thanks to Melanthius.[12]

HOOPOE [152] Well, there are the other Opuntians, in Locris. That's where you should live.

EUELPIDES [153] But I wouldn't become an Opuntius for a talent of gold. Anyway, what's this life with the birds like? You know it inside out.[13]

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11 The *Salaminia* was an Athenian state ship, used among other things to fetch men home for trial.

12 Melanthius, a tragic poet mocked for having leprosy (lepra), hence the dig at Lepreus.

13 Opuntius, a one-eyed Athenian informer; the joke plays on Opus, a city in Locris.

HOOPOE 156 It's not a bad way to pass the time. For a start, you have to live without a purse.

EUELPIDES 158 Well, that takes a lot of the fakery out of life.

HOOPOE 159 And we feed in gardens on white sesame, myrtle berries, poppy and mint.

EUELPIDES 161 So you live the life of bridegrooms![14]

PEISETAERUS Ah! Ah! I see a great plan in the race of birds—and power that could be yours, if you'd trust me.

HOOPOE 164 Trust you in what?

PEISETAERUS In what? First, stop flying around everywhere with your beaks hanging open. It's a disgraceful way to behave. For instance, back home, if you ask about the flighty types, "Who's that bird?," Teleas will tell you: "That man? A bird—unstable, flighty, untraceable, never staying put anywhere."[15]

HOOPOE 171 By Dionysus, that's a fair criticism. So what should we do?

PEISETAERUS 172 Found a single city.

HOOPOE 173 And what sort of city could we birds found?

PEISETAERUS 174 Really? What a stupid thing to say! Look down.

HOOPOE 175 There, I'm looking.

PEISETAERUS Now look up.

HOOPOE 176 I'm looking.

PEISETAERUS Turn your neck around.

HOOPOE By Zeus, a fine reward I'll get, if I end up with my neck twisted!

PEISETAERUS 178 Did you see anything?

HOOPOE The clouds and the sky.

PEISETAERUS 179 Well, isn't that the birds' pole?

14 Sesame cakes, poppy seed and myrtle wreaths all featured at Greek weddings.
15 Teleas, an Athenian politician with a reputation for fickleness.

HOOPOE [180] Pole? What do you mean?

PEISETAERUS Their place, you might say. And because it revolves, and everything passes through it, it's called the "pole" for now. But once you settle it and wall it in, instead of a "pole" it'll be called a "polis"—a city. Then you'll rule over humans as if they were locusts, and kill the gods with a Melian famine.[16]

HOOPOE [187] How?

PEISETAERUS The air is in between earth and heaven, surely. So, just as we, when we want to go to Delphi, have to ask the Boeotians for right of passage, in the same way, when humans sacrifice to the gods, unless the gods pay you tribute, you won't let the savor of the thighbones pass through.

HOOPOE [194] Hurray! Hurray! By earth, by snares, by clouds, by nets, I've never heard a cleverer idea! So I'll found the city with you—if the other birds agree.

PEISETAERUS [198] Then who's going to explain the plan to them?

HOOPOE You. They couldn't speak Greek before, but I taught them language, living with them all this time.

PEISETAERUS [201] So how would you call them together?

HOOPOE Easily. I'll step right into this thicket here, wake up my nightingale, and we'll call them. If they hear our voices, they'll come running.

PEISETAERUS [206] Dearest of birds, don't just stand there! Please, I beg you, go into the thicket as fast as you can and wake the nightingale.

16 A pun on pólos (the turning vault of the sky) and pólis (city). The "Melian famine" recalls Athens' siege and starvation of Melos in 416 BC.

PARODOS

The Hoopoe wakes the Nightingale and calls the birds, who flock in and are outraged to find humans.

HOOPOE

209 Come, my mate, leave off your sleep,
let loose the strains of holy hymns
that your divine mouth pours out in grief
for Itys, yours and mine, so much lamented.
And as you trill in holy melodies
with your tawny throat,
the pure sound travels through the leafy
bindweed up to the throne of Zeus,
where Phoebus of the golden hair hears,
and plucks in answer to your laments
his ivory-bound lyre, and the gods'
dances begin; and from immortal
lips there rises, all in harmony,
the holy cry of the blessed ones.[17]

PEISETAERUS 223 King Zeus, what a voice that little bird has! She's poured honey over the whole thicket.

EUELPIDES 225 Hey!

PEISETAERUS What is it? Will you be quiet?

EUELPIDES Why?

PEISETAERUS 226 The hoopoe's getting ready to sing again.

17 Itys was the son of Tereus and Procne; she killed him in revenge, and as the nightingale mourns him forever.

HOOPOE

227 Epopoi popopopopopopopoi,
io io ito ito ito ito,
come here, come, my fellow feathered ones:
all you who graze on the farmers' well-sown fields,
countless tribes of barley-eaters,
and the clans of seed-pickers,
swift in flight, letting loose soft cries;
all you who in the furrow often
twitter around the clods like this, so delicately,
with joyful voice:
tio tio tio tio tio tio tio tio.

238 And all of you who in the gardens, on the ivy's
branches, have your feeding grounds,
and you of the mountains, the olive-eaters, the arbutus-
eaters,
hurry, fly to my call:
trioto trioto totobrix.
And you who in the marshy glens snap up
the sharp-stinging gnats, and all who keep the dewy places
of the earth
and the lovely meadow of Marathon, and you bird
with dappled wings, francolin, francolin!
And you whose tribes over the swelling waves of the sea
fly with the kingfishers,
come here to hear the news,
for here we're gathering every tribe
of long-necked birds.
A shrewd old man has come,
new in his thinking,
a man who takes on new deeds.

258 Come, all of you, to talk, / here, here, here, here.

CHORUS

Torotorotorotorotorotix.
Kikkabau kikkabau.
Torotorotorotorolililix.

PEISETAERUS Can you see any bird?

EUELPIDES By Apollo, I can't—and I've been gaping at the sky, looking.

PEISETAERUS So it seems the hoopoe went into the thicket and called away for nothing, imitating a plover.

A BIRD Torotix torotix.

PEISETAERUS My good man, look, here's one—a bird's actually coming!

EUELPIDES By Zeus, a bird all right. What on earth is it? Not a peacock, surely?

PEISETAERUS He'll tell us himself. What bird is this?

HOOPOE This one isn't one of the common ones you see all the time—he's a marsh bird.

EUELPIDES Wow, he's beautiful—and flame red!

HOOPOE Naturally. That's why he's called a flamingo.

EUELPIDES Hey, you, I'm talking to you!

PEISETAERUS What are you bawling about?

EUELPIDES Here's another bird.

PEISETAERUS By Zeus, another one all right, and this one's got an outlandish color too. Who can he be, this weird bird, this prophet of the Muses, this mountain-walker?[18]

HOOPOE His name is Mede.

PEISETAERUS Mede? Lord Heracles! Then how did he fly in without a camel, if he's a Mede?[19]

18 The line parodies Aeschylus' lost play *Edonians*.
19 A Mede is a Persian; the bird is probably the rooster, known as "the Persian bird."

EUELPIDES [279] And here's another bird that's seized a crest.

PEISETAERUS [280] What is this marvel? So you weren't the only hoopoe—here's another one?

HOOPOE [281] This one is the son of Philocles' hoopoe, and I'm his grandfather—just as you'd say Hipponicus son of Callias, and Callias son of Hipponicus.[20]

PEISETAERUS [284] So this bird is Callias! Look how he's molting.

EUELPIDES [285] Well, he's well-born, so the informers pluck him, and the women pluck out his feathers too.[21]

PEISETAERUS [287] Poseidon! Here's another one, a dyed bird. What on earth is he called?

HOOPOE [288] This one's a Gobbler.

PEISETAERUS [289] Is there any Gobbler besides Cleonymus?

EUELPIDES [290] But if he were Cleonymus, wouldn't he have thrown away his crest?[22]

PEISETAERUS [291] But tell me, what's with all the crests on these birds? Have they come to run the double-lap race?

HOOPOE [292] No, my good man—it's like the Carians: they live on the crests for safety.[23]

PEISETAERUS [294] Poseidon! Don't you see what a nasty mob of birds has gathered?

EUELPIDES [295] Lord Apollo, what a cloud of them! Wow! You can't even see the entrance anymore, with them all flying about.

HOOPOE [297] This one's a partridge; that one, by Zeus, is a francolin; this one's a widgeon; and that one there's a kingfisher.

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20 Philocles, a tragic poet who wrote his own *Tereus*, reputedly borrowed from Sophocles. In the wealthy family of Callias, the names Callias and Hipponicus alternated by generation.

21 Callias squandered a huge fortune. Informers (sykophantai) were professional accusers who prosecuted, or threatened to, for profit.

22 Cleonymus, a politician mocked as a glutton and for throwing away his shield in battle.

23 Lophos means both a bird's crest and a hilltop; the Carians of Asia Minor were said to live on hilltops for safety.

PEISETAERUS 299 And who's that behind her?

HOOPOE Who is it? A shearwater.

PEISETAERUS 300 A shearer's a bird?

HOOPOE Well, isn't Sporgilus? And this one here is an owl.[24]

EUELPIDES 301 What are you saying? Who brought an owl to Athens?[25]

HOOPOE 302 Jay, turtledove, lark, reed-warbler, wheatear, pigeon, nertos, hawk, ring-dove, cuckoo, redshank, firecrest, purple coot, kestrel, grebe, vine-bird, bearded vulture, woodpecker.[26]

PEISETAERUS 305 Wow, wow, the birds! Wow, wow, the blackbirds! How they cheep, and run around shrieking! Are they threatening us? Oh no, they've got their beaks open, and they're staring at you and me.

EUELPIDES 308 That's how it looks to me too.

CHORUS 310 Popopopopopopopopopopoi, where then is he / who called me? Where on earth does he feed?

HOOPOE 312 Here I am, I've been here all along. I never desert my friends.

CHORUS 313 What-what-what-what-what-what-what-what—what word, then, / do you bring me, your friend?

HOOPOE 316 Something for all of us, safe, just, sweet and profitable. Two men, subtle thinkers, have come here to see me.

CHORUS 318 Where? Which way? What do you mean?

HOOPOE 320 I mean two old men have come here from the human world, and they've brought the root of a colossal enterprise.

---

24 The Greek keirylos puns on keirein, "to shear"; Sporgilus was an Athenian barber.

25 "Owls to Athens" was a proverb for bringing something where it's already plentiful: the owl was Athena's bird and stamped on Athenian coins.

26 Several of these birds can't be identified with certainty; nertos is left untranslated.

CHORUS [322] You've made the biggest blunder since the day I was hatched! What are you saying?

HOOPOE [323] Don't be afraid of the idea yet.

CHORUS What have you done to me?

HOOPOE [324] I've taken in two men who are in love with our company.

CHORUS [325] You actually did that?

HOOPOE I did, and I'm glad I did.

CHORUS [326] And they're already here somewhere among us?

HOOPOE As surely as I am.

FIRST AGON

The birds attack; the two men defend themselves with pots and spits until the Hoopoe talks the chorus down.

CHORUS

[327] Ah! Ah!
We're betrayed, we've suffered an outrage!
He who was our friend, who fed with us
on the same fields at our side,
has broken our ancient laws,
has broken the oaths of the birds!
He called me into a trap, and threw me to
an unholy race that, ever since it was born,
has been raised as my enemy.

[336] Well, we'll deal with him later. These two old men, I say, should pay the penalty and be torn to pieces by us.

PEISETAERUS [338] So we're done for.

EUELPIDES [339] And you're the only one to blame for this mess. What did you bring me from there for?

PEISETAERUS [340] So you'd keep me company.

EUELPIDES [341] No—so I could cry my eyes out.

PEISETAERUS Now you're really talking nonsense. How are you going to cry, once your eyes have been pecked out?

CHORUS

343 Io! Io!
Charge, attack, bring on the hostile,
murderous onslaught! Wings on every side,
throw them around them, close them in!
These two must howl, both of them,
and give my beak its fodder.
For no shady mountain, no cloud in the upper air,
no gray sea exists that will take in
these two, if they escape me.

352 No more delay: let's pluck them and bite them now. Where's the brigade commander? Let him lead on the right wing!

EUELPIDES 354 This is it! Where can I run, poor me?

PEISETAERUS Hey, won't you stand your ground?

EUELPIDES 355 So they can tear me to pieces?

PEISETAERUS Well, how do you think you'd get away from them?

EUELPIDES 356 I don't know how.

PEISETAERUS Then I'll tell you: we have to stand and fight, and grab some of these pots.

EUELPIDES 358 And what good is a pot going to do us?

PEISETAERUS An owl won't come near us.[27]

EUELPIDES 359 And these ones here with the hooked claws?

PEISETAERUS Snatch up the spit and plant it in front of you.

EUELPIDES 360 And what about our eyes?

27 Athena, whose bird was the owl, was patron of Athens' potters, so the owl would spare Athenian pottery.

PEISETAERUS 361 Take a saucer or a bowl from here and tie it on.

EUELPIDES 362 You genius, that's brilliant—a real general's idea! You outshoot Nicias already when it comes to siege engines.[28]

CHORUS 364 Eleleleu! Advance! Lower your beaks! No more delay! Drag, pluck, strike, flay—smash the pot first!

HOOPOE 366 Tell me, you vilest of all creatures, why are you about to kill and tear apart two men who've done you no harm—kinsmen and fellow tribesmen of my wife?[29]

CHORUS 369 Why should we spare them any more than wolves? Or whom could we punish who are more hateful than these?

HOOPOE 371 But what if they're enemies by nature but friends in their intentions, and they've come here to teach you something useful?

CHORUS 373 How could these two ever teach us anything useful, or tell us anything, when they're the enemies of my forefathers?

HOOPOE 375 Oh, but the wise learn a great deal from their enemies. Caution is what keeps everything safe. You wouldn't learn that from a friend, but an enemy forces it on you straight away. For instance, it was from enemies, not friends, that cities learned to build high walls and to own warships; and that lesson keeps children, home and property safe.

CHORUS 381 Well, it seems to us useful to hear what they have to say first. One can learn something wise even from enemies.

PEISETAERUS 383 They seem to be letting their anger go. Fall back, slowly.

HOOPOE 384 And it's only right—and you owe me a favor.

CHORUS 385 Well, we've never opposed you in anything else so far.

---

28 Nicias, a cautious Athenian general known for siege works, then commanding at Syracuse (414 BC).

29 Tereus' wife Procne was an Athenian princess, so the two men are her countrymen.

PEISETAERUS 386 By Zeus, they're turning more peaceable, so put down the pot and the two bowls. But we should keep the spear—the spit, I mean—and patrol inside our lines, keeping watch right over the rim of the pot, up close. There's no running away for us.

EUELPIDES 393 Seriously, though, if we do die, where on earth will we be buried?

PEISETAERUS 395 The Ceramicus will take us. To get a public funeral, we'll tell the generals we died fighting the enemy at Orneae.[30]

FIRST CHORAL SONG

The birds fall back into line and question the Hoopoe about the strangers and their purpose.

CHORUS 400 Fall back into line, back to your places. Ground your temper beside your anger, the way a soldier stoops to ground his arms, and let's find out who these two are, where they've come from, and what they're after. Hey, Hoopoe, I'm calling you!

HOOPOE 407 You call me—what do you want to hear?

CHORUS 408 Who are they, and where are they from?

HOOPOE 409 Two strangers from Greece, home of wisdom.

CHORUS

410 And what fortune, then, has brought
the two of them to the birds,
to come here?

HOOPOE

412 Love—
of your life and your way of living,
and to live with you
and be with you in everything.

30 The Ceramicus was Athens' burial ground for the war dead. Orneae, a town in the Argolid attacked by Athens in 416 BC, sounds like ornea, "birds."

CHORUS 416 What's that? / And what are they proposing?

HOOPOE 417 Things past belief, beyond all hearing.

CHORUS

418 Does he see some gain here worth
his staying for, that makes him trust
that, living with me ...
he could beat his enemy or
be able to help his friends?

HOOPOE

422 He speaks of some vast bliss, beyond
all words, beyond belief:
that all of this is yours—
what's here, what's there,
what's over here: that's how he wins you over.

CHORUS 427 Is he mad?

HOOPOE 428 Unspeakably sensible.

CHORUS 429 Is there some wisdom in his head?

HOOPOE

430 The craftiest fox there is:
all cleverness, a rare catch, worn smooth,
sifted as fine as flour.

CHORUS

432 Tell him, tell him to speak to me!
For hearing the words you tell me
I'm all aflutter.

FIRST EPISODE

The birds swear a truce, and Peisetaerus gets ready to make his case.

HOOPOE 435 Come on, then, you two. Take this armor and hang it back up, and good luck to it, in there in the kitchen next to the

pot-stand. And you, explain to these birds the proposals I called them together to hear. Lay it all out for them.

PEISETAERUS 439 No, by Apollo, not me. Not unless they make the same pact with me that the Monkey made with his wife (the knife-maker, I mean): that they won't bite me, or yank my balls, or poke into my—[31]

CHORUS 442 You don't mean your—? Never!

PEISETAERUS 443 No, I mean my eyes.

CHORUS 444 I agree to the pact.

PEISETAERUS Then swear to it.

CHORUS 445 I swear it, on these terms: that I win with every one of the judges and the whole audience.

PEISETAERUS 446 So it shall be.

CHORUS 447 And if I break it, may I win by just one judge's vote.

HERALD 448 Attention, people! The infantry are hereby ordered to pick up their weapons right now and go back home, and to watch for whatever we post on the noticeboards.

31 Panaetius, a knife-maker nicknamed "the Monkey," was apparently a small man with a large and formidable wife, and the two had reportedly made a pact not to fight.

SECOND AGON

Peisetaerus argues that birds once ruled the world and shows how they can take power back from the gods.

CHORUS

451 Man is a crafty creature by nature,
always, in every way. Still, speak to me.
Maybe you'll happen
to tell me some good you see in me that I've missed,
or some greater power
my foolish mind has passed over.
Tell everyone what you see.
Whatever good you happen
to bring me will belong to us all.

460 Come on, whatever plan you've talked yourself into and brought here with you, out with it boldly. We certainly won't be the first to break the truce.

PEISETAERUS 462 Well, by Zeus, I'm swelling with eagerness. I've got one speech already mixed like dough, and there's nothing to stop me kneading it. Boy, bring me a garland! Someone fetch water, quick, to pour over my hands.

EUELPIDES 464 Are we about to have dinner, or what?

PEISETAERUS 465 No, by Zeus. I've been hunting for a while for something to say, something big and juicy, that'll crush these birds' souls. That's how sorry I feel for you, since you were once kings—

CHORUS 467 Us, kings? Of what?

PEISETAERUS You were, of everything there is: of me first, of this fellow here, of Zeus himself. You were born before Cronus and the Titans, and you're older than they are. Older than Earth, too.

CHORUS 470 Than Earth, too?

PEISETAERUS Yes, by Apollo.

CHORUS Well, by Zeus, I never heard that.

PEISETAERUS 471 That's because you're ignorant and incurious by nature, and you haven't thumbed your Aesop. He says the crested lark was the very first bird to be born, before Earth even existed, and then her father fell sick and died. There was no earth yet, and he'd been lying out for five days, and she didn't know what to do. So in desperation she buried her father in her own head.[32]

EUELPIDES 476 So the lark's father now lies dead and buried at Cephale.[33]

PEISETAERUS 477 So, then, if they were born before Earth and before the gods, doesn't the kingship rightly belong to them as the eldest?

EUELPIDES 479 By Apollo, it does! So from now on you'd better start growing yourself a beak. Zeus won't be in any hurry to hand his scepter over to the woodpecker.

PEISETAERUS 481 Now, there's plenty of evidence that in ancient times it wasn't gods who ruled human beings but birds, and that birds were kings. For a start, I'll show you the rooster: how he was tyrant and ruled the Persians before anyone else, before Darius and Megabazus, so that he's still called "the Persian bird" from that reign of his.

EUELPIDES 486 So that's why even now he struts around like the Great King, the only bird with his tiara standing upright on his head.[34]

PEISETAERUS 488 He was so strong, so great and so mighty back then that even now, because of that old power of his, the moment he sings at dawn everyone leaps up and goes to work: smiths, potters, tanners, cobblers, bath-men, grain-dealers,

32 The lark's crest is imagined as the father's burial mound.
33 Cephale, an Attic deme, has a name meaning "Head."
34 Only the Persian king, the "Great King," could wear his tiara upright. The rooster's comb looks like one.

lathe-lyre-shield-makers. Some of them even put on their shoes and set off while it's still dark.

EUELPIDES 492 You can ask me about that! Thanks to him I lost a cloak of Phrygian wool, poor wretch that I am. I'd been invited into town once to a baby's tenth-day party, and I'd had a few drinks and just dropped off to sleep, when this fellow crowed before the others had even had dinner. I thought it was dawn and set off for Halimus. I'd only just stuck my nose outside the wall when a mugger clubbed me across the back. Down I went, and I was about to yell, but he'd already stripped the cloak off me.[35]

PEISETAERUS 499 Anyway, the kite was ruler and king of the Greeks back then.

CHORUS 500 Of the Greeks?

PEISETAERUS Yes, and it was he who, as king, first taught them to roll on the ground before kites.[36]

EUELPIDES 501 By Dionysus, I certainly did roll over once when I saw a kite. And as I lay there on my back with my mouth wide open I swallowed an obol. Then I had to drag my empty bag back home.[37]

PEISETAERUS 504 Egypt and all Phoenicia, on the other hand, had the cuckoo for king. And whenever the cuckoo said "cuckoo," all the Phoenicians would harvest the wheat and barley in their fields.

EUELPIDES 507 So that's what the old saying really means: "Cuckoo! Circumcised men, out to the fields!"[38]

PEISETAERUS 508 And their rule was so strong that if anyone was king in the cities of the Greeks, an Agamemnon or a

35 On the tenth day after a birth Athenians held a party at which the baby was named. Halimus was a coastal deme south of the city.
36 Greeks greeted the first kite of spring, the sign of the season's turn, by bowing down to the ground.
37 Athenians often carried small coins in their mouths. He had gone to market with nothing else to buy food with.

Menelaus, a bird sat perched on his scepter, taking a share of any bribe he took.

EUELPIDES 511 Well, I didn't know that. And it always used to amaze me when some Priam came on in the tragedies holding a bird. So it was standing there watching Lysicrates, to see what bribe he'd take![39]

PEISETAERUS 514 But here's the most amazing thing of all. Zeus, the one who's king now, stands there with an eagle on his head as the sign of his kingship, and his daughter has an owl, and Apollo, as his servant, a hawk.

EUELPIDES 517 By Demeter, that's true. So why do they have them?

PEISETAERUS 518 So that when someone sacrifices and then puts the innards into the god's hand, as the custom is, the birds can grab them before Zeus does. And back then no human being ever swore by a god. Everyone swore by birds. Lampon still swears "by the goose" even now, whenever he's cheating somebody. That's how great and holy everyone used to think you were—[40]

523 but now they think you're slaves and idiots, a bunch of Maneses. They throw stones at you now as if you were madmen, and in the temples every bird-catcher sets up traps for you: nooses, snares, lime-twigs, nets, fine nets, meshes and cages. Then they catch you and sell you off in bunches, and the buyers finger you to see how plump you are. And if they must do this, they don't even just roast you and serve you up. No, they grate cheese over you, and oil, silphium, vinegar, and whisk up another sauce, sweet and greasy, and then they pour it over you piping hot, as if you were carrion.[41]

38 A proverbial harvest call. Egyptians and Phoenicians practiced circumcision, and the Greek word (psōloi) is also crude slang for a bared, erect cock.
39 Lysicrates, an Athenian official evidently notorious for taking bribes.
40 Lampon, a prominent seer. "By the goose" (Greek Chēna) is a dodge for "by Zeus" (Zēna).
41 Manes was a common slave name.

CHORUS

539 Hard, hard indeed are the words
you've brought us, man. How I've wept
for my fathers' cowardice!
They had these honors from their forebears
and in my time they threw them away.
But you've come to me by the gods' will,
by some lucky chance,
to be my savior.
I'll put my chicks and myself
in your hands and make my home with you.

548 Now you're here, teach us what we have to do. Life isn't worth living for us unless we win back our kingship by any means we can.

PEISETAERUS 550 All right, then. First, I propose that there be one single city of the birds. And then that you wall in the whole air all around, all this space in between, with great baked bricks, like Babylon.

HOOPOE 553 Cebriones and Porphyrion! What a fearsome fortress![42]

PEISETAERUS 554 And then, once it's up, you demand the rule back from Zeus. If he says no, or won't hear of it, or doesn't concede defeat right away, you declare a holy war on him and forbid the gods to go strolling through your territory with hard-ons, the way they used to come down before to cheat on their wives with the Alcmenas and the Alopes and the Semeles. And if they try it, you slap a seal on their pricks so they can't fuck those women anymore.[43] 561 And to human beings, I say, send another bird as herald to tell them that since the birds are now kings, they must sacrifice to the birds from now on, and only after that to the gods. And they're to assign to each god whichever bird

42 Cebriones and Porphyrion were Giants who made war on the gods. Porphyrion is also the name of a bird.
43 Alcmena, Alope and Semele were mortal women seduced by gods.

suits him. If someone sacrifices to Aphrodite, he's to offer wheat to the coot. If someone sacrifices a sheep to Poseidon, he's to dedicate wheat to the duck. If he sacrifices something to Heracles, he's to offer honey-cakes to the gull. And if he sacrifices a ram to Zeus the King, well, the wren is a king-bird, and before Zeus himself they must slaughter an uncastrated gnat for him.[44]

EUELPIDES 570 I love it, a gnat for the slaughter! Now let great Zeus thunder all he likes!

CHORUS 571 And how will humans think we're gods and not jackdaws, when we fly and have wings?

PEISETAERUS 572 Nonsense! Why, by Zeus, Hermes flies, and he's a god, and he wears wings, and plenty of other gods do too. Victory, for one, flies on a pair of golden wings, and so, by Zeus, does Eros. And Homer said that Hera was like a timid dove.

EUELPIDES 576 And won't Zeus thunder at us and send down his winged thunderbolt?

PEISETAERUS 577 Well, if out of ignorance they think you're nothing, and those gods on Olympus are the gods, then a cloud of sparrows and seed-pickers must rise up and peck the seed out of their fields. And then let Demeter measure out wheat to them when they're starving.

EUELPIDES 581 She won't want to, by Zeus. You'll see her making excuses.

PEISETAERUS 582 And the ravens, to test them, can peck out the eyes of the ox-teams they plow the land with, and of their sheep. Then let Apollo cure them, since he's a doctor. He's on a salary, after all.

EUELPIDES 585 Not before I've sold off my pair of little oxen!

PEISETAERUS 586 But if they think of you as their god, their life, their Earth, their Cronus, their Poseidon, they'll have every good thing there is.

44 Puns: phalēris (coot) suggests phallos, and orchilos (wren) suggests orcheis, "balls," so the wren's victim must have its balls, like a sacrificial ram. The gull is a glutton, like Heracles.

HOOPOE [587] Name me one of those good things.

PEISETAERUS [588] First of all, the locusts won't eat up their vine-blossoms. A single company of owls and kestrels will wipe them out. Then the gnats and gall-flies won't be forever eating their figs. One flock of thrushes will pick them all off clean.

HOOPOE [592] And where will we get wealth to give them? That's what they're really in love with.

PEISETAERUS [593] When they consult them for omens, these birds will give them the good mines, and they'll tell the seer which trading voyages pay, so that not one ship's captain will be lost.

HOOPOE [595] How will none of them be lost?

PEISETAERUS [596] Whenever he consults about a voyage, one of the birds will always tell him in advance: "Don't sail now, there'll be a storm," or "Sail now, there'll be profit."

EUELPIDES [598] I'm buying a freighter and going to sea. I'm not sticking around here with you!

PEISETAERUS [599] And they'll show them the hoards of silver that people buried long ago, because they know where they are. That's what everyone says, after all: "Nobody knows where my treasure is, except maybe a bird."

EUELPIDES [602] I'm selling the freighter, buying a shovel and digging up the jars!

HOOPOE [603] And how will they give them health? That's in the gods' keeping.

PEISETAERUS [604] If they're doing well, isn't that great health? Believe me, no man who's doing badly is ever really healthy.

HOOPOE [606] And how will they ever reach old age? That's on Olympus too. Or will they have to die as little children?

PEISETAERUS [607] No, by Zeus. The birds will add three hundred more years to their lives.

HOOPOE [608] Taken from whom?

PEISETAERUS From whom? From themselves. Don't you know that "the cawing crow lives five generations of men"?

EUELPIDES [610] Wow! These are far better kings for us than Zeus!

PEISETAERUS [611] Far better, aren't they? First of all, we won't have to build them stone temples or fit them with golden doors. They'll live under bushes and scrub oaks. And for the grander birds an olive tree will be their temple. We won't go to Delphi or to Ammon to sacrifice there. We'll stand among the strawberry trees and wild olives holding out barley and wheat, and raise our hands and pray to them to give us a share of good things. And we'll get them on the spot, for tossing them a few grains of wheat.[45]

FIRST LYRIC SCENE

Won over, the chorus pledges to follow Peisetaerus against the gods.

CHORUS [627] Dearest of old men to me by far, who've changed from my worst enemy, there's no way I'll ever willingly let go of your plan now.

[629] Exulting in your words
I've made a threat and sworn an oath:
if you join with me
in words of one mind, just,
without guile, holy,
and march against the gods, with me

[635] in harmony of mind, then not much longer / will the gods be wearing out my scepter.

[637] Whatever needs doing by strength, we'll take our stations for that. Whatever needs planning by judgment, all of that is up to you.

45 Ammon: the oracle of Zeus Ammon in the Libyan desert.

SECOND EPISODE

The Hoopoe takes the men inside to grow wings, and the Nightingale comes out to play for the chorus.

HOOPOE 639 And now, by Zeus, it's no time for us to be dozing any longer, or to be doing a Nicias and dithering. We need to act, as fast as we can. But first, come inside my nest, my twigs and what bits of brush I have, and tell us your names.[46]

PEISETAERUS 643 Easy enough. My name is Peisetaerus, and this fellow is Euelpides, from Crioa.[47]

HOOPOE 645 Well, welcome, both of you.

PEISETAERUS 646 Thank you.

HOOPOE This way, then. Come on in.

PEISETAERUS 647 Let's go. You lead us in.

HOOPOE Come.

PEISETAERUS 648 But hey, what's-your-name, back water and come back here a moment. Let's see. Tell us: how are he and I going to live with you, when you fly and we don't?

HOOPOE 651 Easily.

PEISETAERUS Watch out, though. There's a story in Aesop about the fox, and what a bad partnership she once made with an eagle.[48]

HOOPOE 654 Don't be afraid. There's a little root: chew it and you'll both have wings.

PEISETAERUS 656 On that basis, let's go in. Come on, Xanthias and Manodorus, pick up the bedding.

CHORUS 658 Hey, you! I'm calling you, yes, you!

HOOPOE What are you calling me for?

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46 The Greek coins a verb from Nicias' name and mellein, "to put off": the general was famous for caution and delay.
47 Crioa was an Attic deme.
48 In the fable the eagle broke the partnership by eating the fox's cubs.

CHORUS Take these two along with you and give them a good lunch. But the nightingale, sweet singer in tune with the Muses, bring her out here and leave her with us, so we can play with her.

PEISETAERUS 661 Oh yes, by Zeus, do as they say! Bring the little bird out of the rushes.

EUELPIDES 663 For the gods' sake, bring her out, so we can have a look at the nightingale too.

HOOPOE 665 Well, if you both want it, that's what we'll do. Procne! Come out and show yourself to our guests.

PEISETAERUS 667 Zeus most honored, what a beautiful little bird! How soft, how white!

EUELPIDES 668 You know what? I'd love to get between her thighs.

PEISETAERUS 670 And all that gold she's wearing, like a young girl!

EUELPIDES 671 I think I'd even give her a kiss.

PEISETAERUS 672 You poor sap, her beak's like a pair of skewers!

EUELPIDES 673 Well then, by Zeus, you just peel the shell off her head like an egg, and kiss her that way.

HOOPOE 675 Let's go.

PEISETAERUS Lead on, then, and good luck to us.

FIRST PARABASIS

The birds address the audience, tell how they were born before the gods, and list their gifts to humans.

CHORUS

676 Dear one, tawny one,
dearest of all
the birds, partner in all my
songs, nightingale, my companion,
you've come, you've come, I see you,
bringing your sweet voice to me.
You who strike up the fair-voiced pipe
with notes of spring,
lead off our anapests.[49]

685 Come now, you men whose lives are dim by nature, like the generations of leaves: you feeble things, figures molded of clay, shadowy tribes without strength, wingless creatures of a day, wretched mortals, men like dreams. Pay attention to us, the immortals, the everlasting, the ones who live in the air, the ageless, whose thoughts never perish. Then you'll hear from us the whole truth about the things on high: the nature of birds, and the birth of the gods and the rivers, of Erebus and of Chaos. And once you know it properly, you can tell Prodicus from me to go to hell.[50] 693 In the beginning there were Chaos and Night and black Erebus and broad Tartarus. There was no earth, no air, no sky. And in the boundless lap of Erebus, Night of the black wings first of all laid a wind-egg. From it, as the seasons came around, sprang Eros the longed-for, his back gleaming with golden wings, like the swift whirlwinds. He mated with winged Chaos, dark as night, in broad Tartarus, and hatched our race, and was the first to bring it up into the light. Before that there was no race of immortals, until Eros mixed everything together. And as

49 The Nightingale's song was played on the aulos, a double reed-pipe, by a performer costumed as the bird.
50 Prodicus, a famous sophist who lectured on nature and the origins of the gods.

things mixed with one another, there came to be Sky and Ocean and Earth, and the imperishable race of all the blessed gods.[51] 702 So that's how we come to be by far the oldest of all the blessed ones. And there's plenty to show that we're children of Eros: we fly, and we keep company with lovers. Many beautiful boys who'd sworn off love, near the end of their youth, have let their lovers between their thighs thanks to our power, one for the gift of a quail, another a porphyrion, another a goose, another a Persian bird.[52]

708 All the greatest blessings mortals have come from us birds. First, we reveal the seasons: spring, winter, autumn. It's time to sow when the crane flies off croaking to Libya. That's when she tells the ship's captain to hang up his rudder and sleep, and tells Orestes to weave himself a cloak, so he won't shiver while he strips people of theirs. After that the kite appears and announces another season, when it's time to shear the sheep's spring fleece. Then comes the swallow, when it's time to sell your heavy cloak and buy something light. We're your Ammon, your Delphi, your Dodona, your Phoebus Apollo.[53] 717 You come to the birds first, and only then turn to everything else: business, making a living, a man's marriage. Everything that decides an omen you call a "bird." A chance remark is a "bird" to you. You call a sneeze a "bird," a chance meeting a "bird," a sound a "bird," a servant a "bird," a donkey a "bird." Isn't it obvious that we're your prophetic Apollo?[54]

723 So if you treat us as gods, you'll have us as your prophets, your Muses, your breezes and seasons, your winter, your summer, your moderate heat. And we won't run off and sit up there among the clouds giving ourselves airs, the way Zeus does. No, we'll be right here, and we'll give to you, your children and your children's children wealth-and-health, happiness, life, peace,

51 A "wind-egg" is an unfertilized egg. Erebus is the primeval darkness.
52 Birds were customary love-gifts from men to boys. The porphyrion is the purple swamphen.
53 Orestes, apparently a notorious Athenian mugger who stole people's cloaks.
54 Greek ornis, "bird," also meant "omen," so any sign at all could be called a "bird."

youth, laughter, dances, feasts, and bird's milk. You'll be worn out by all the good things. That's how rich you'll all be.[55]

737 Muse of the thicket,
tio tio tio tio tio tio tiotinx,
Muse of the dappled song, with whom I,
in the glens and on the mountain peaks,
tio tio tio tiotinx,
perched on a leafy ash,
tio tio tio tiotinx,
pour from my tawny throat
holy strains for Pan
and solemn dances for the Mountain Mother,
totototototototototinx,
where, like a bee,
Phrynichus fed on the fruit of ambrosial songs,
always bringing back sweet song.
tio tio tio tiotinx.[56]

752 If any of you spectators wants to spend the rest of his life living pleasantly among the birds, let him come to us. Everything that's shameful here and ruled out by law is fine among us birds. If here it's shameful by law to beat your father, up there among us it's fine for someone to run up to his father, hit him and say, "Put up your spur, if you want a fight." If one of you happens to be a runaway slave with a brand on him, among us he'll be called a speckled francolin. And if someone happens to be just as much a Phrygian as Spintharus, here he'll be a Phrygi-finch, of Philemon's line.[57] 764 And if someone is a slave and a Carian, like Execestides, let him fledge some forefathers among us, and clan-brothers will turn up for him. And if Pisias' son wants to betray the city gates to the disenfranchised, let him

55 "Bird's milk" was proverbial for a luxury beyond imagining.
56 Phrynichus, a tragic poet of the early fifth century BC, famous for the sweetness of his lyrics.
57 The Greek phrygilos, a kind of finch, sounds like Phryx, "Phrygian." Spintharus and Philemon were Athenians mocked as foreigners passing as citizens.

become a partridge, a chick off the old bird. Among us there's nothing shameful in giving them the slip like a partridge.[58]

769 Just so the swans,
tio tio tia tio tio tiotinx,
beating their wings,
raised all together their mingled cry to Apollo,
tio tio tio tiotinx,
perched on the bank by the river Hebrus,
tio tio tio tiotinx,
and the cry went up through the clouds of heaven.
The dappled tribes of beasts cowered,
a windless calm stilled the waves,
totototototototototinx,
all Olympus rang out,
wonder seized its lords, and the Graces of Olympus
and the Muses raised a joyful shout in answer.
tio tio tio tiotinx.

785 There's nothing better or sweeter than growing wings. Take any of you spectators: if he had wings, and got hungry and fed up with the tragic choruses, he could fly off, go home and have lunch, and then, once he'd eaten his fill, fly back down here to us. And if some Patroclides among you happens to need a shit, he wouldn't have to shit himself in his cloak. He'd fly up, let off a fart, catch his breath, and fly back down again. And if one of you happens to be having an affair, and sees the woman's husband in the Council seats, he could flap up and away from among you, go fuck her, and then fly back down again.[59] 797 So isn't growing wings worth anything? Look at Diitrephes. With nothing but wicker-jar wings, he got elected tribal cavalry commander, then

58 Greek pappos means both "grandfather" and "down feathers," and citizens proved their birth through their phratry, or "clan-brothers." Partridges were known for slipping away from hunters.

59 Patroclides, an Athenian apparently notorious for having soiled himself in public.

cavalry commander, and now, from nothing, he's a big success and a tawny horse-cock.[60]

SECOND LYRIC SCENE

The city is named Cloudcuckooland; a poet, an oracle-monger, Meton, an inspector and a decree-seller are driven off.

PEISETAERUS 801 Well, here we are. By Zeus, I've never in my life seen anything more ridiculous.

EUELPIDES 803 What are you laughing at?

PEISETAERUS At those swift wings of yours. Do you know what you look most like with your feathers on? A goose in a cut-price painting.

EUELPIDES 806 And you look like a blackbird that's been plucked with a bowl cut.

PEISETAERUS 807 That's how we've been pictured, just as in Aeschylus: "not by others, but by our own feathers."[61]

HOOPOE 809 Come on, then: what needs doing?

PEISETAERUS First we give the city a name, something grand and glorious. Then, after that, we sacrifice to the gods.

EUELPIDES 811 I'm with you on that.

HOOPOE 812 Let's see, now. What's our city's name going to be?

EUELPIDES 813 How about that grand name from Lacedaemon? Shall we call it Sparta?

PEISETAERUS 814 Heracles! Would I give my city the name Sparta? I wouldn't even string my bed with sparta, not while I had good webbing.[62]

EUELPIDES 817 Then what name are we going to give it?

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60 Diitrephes got rich making wicker-covered wine jars, whose handles were called "wings." The horse-cock was a fabulous creature, half horse and half rooster, named in a play by Aeschylus.

61 In a lost play of Aeschylus, an eagle shot down by an arrow fletched with eagle feathers says it is struck "not by others, but by our own feathers."

62 Spartē, besides the city, is esparto rope, used for stringing beds.

HOOPOE Something from right here, from the clouds and these lofty regions. Something really light and fluffy.

PEISETAERUS 819 How about Cloudcuckooland?

HOOPOE 820 Hurray, hurray! That's a truly fine, grand name you've found.

EUELPIDES 821 Is this Cloudcuckooland where Theogenes keeps his vast fortune, and all of Aeschines' wealth?[63]

PEISETAERUS 823 Better still, it's the Plain of Phlegra, where the gods outdid the Earth-born Giants at bragging.[64]

HOOPOE 826 A splendid thing, this city! But which god will be its guardian? For whom shall we card the wool for the robe?[65]

EUELPIDES 828 Why not let Athena of the City keep the job?

PEISETAERUS 829 And how could a city ever be well ordered where a god who was born a woman stands there in full armor, while Cleisthenes holds a weaving shuttle?[66]

EUELPIDES 832 Then who'll hold our city's Stork Wall?[67]

HOOPOE 833 A bird from our own ranks, of the Persian breed, said to be the fiercest anywhere: the War-god's chick.

EUELPIDES 835 Oh, Lord Chick! What a perfect god to live up on the rocks!

PEISETAERUS 837 Right, then. You get going up to the air and lend the wall-builders a hand: carry up gravel, strip off and knead the mortar, haul up the hod, fall off the ladder, post sentries, keep the fire banked, run the rounds with the bell and sleep up there. And send off heralds, one up to the gods above,

63 Theogenes and Aeschines were Athenian braggarts whose riches existed mainly in their talk.
64 Phlegra was where the gods fought and defeated the Giants.
65 At the Panathenaea the Athenians presented a newly woven robe (peplos) to Athena, the city's guardian.
66 Cleisthenes, an Athenian Aristophanes constantly mocks as beardless and soft.
67 The old fortification of the Athenian Acropolis was the Pelargikon, a name that sounds like pelargos, "stork."

another from up there down to mankind below, and from there back to me again.

EUELPIDES 845 And you can stay right here and go to hell—"back to me"!

PEISETAERUS 846 Go where I'm sending you, my good man. Nothing I've been talking about will get done without you. As for me, I'm going to sacrifice to the new gods, so I'll call the priest to lead the procession. Boy! Boy! Pick up the basket and the holy water.

PRIEST

851 I'm with you, I want it too,
I join in urging
great and solemn processional songs
to go up to the gods,
and, on top of that, in thanks,
to sacrifice some little sheep.
Let it come, let it come, the Pythian cry to the god,
and let Chaeris pipe along with the song.[68]

PEISETAERUS 859 You, stop blowing! Heracles, what was that? By Zeus, I've seen plenty of awful things, but I've never yet seen a raven wearing a piper's mouth-strap. Priest, it's your job: sacrifice to the new gods.[69]

PRIEST 864 I will. But where's the man with the basket? Pray to Hestia of the Birds, and to the Kite, Keeper of the Hearth, and to the Olympian birds and bird-goddesses, all of them, every one—

PEISETAERUS 866 Hail, Sunium-hawk, lord of the Stork Wall![70]

PRIEST 867 —and to the Pythian and Delian Swan, and to Leto, Mother of Quails, and to Artemis Goldfinch—

68 Chaeris, a piper Aristophanes mocks as a terrible player.
69 The piper is costumed as a raven, with the leather band pipers wore around the mouth.
70 A parody of the cult title "Poseidon of Sunium," from the cape at the southern tip of Attica.

PEISETAERUS 868 No more Artemis Colaenis: now it's Artemis Goldfinch.[71]

PRIEST 876 —and to Sabazius, the Phrygian Finch, and to the Ostrich, great mother of gods and men—[72]

PEISETAERUS 877 Lady Cybele, Ostrich, mother of Cleocritus![73]

PRIEST 878 —grant health and safety to the Cloudcuckoolanders, to themselves and to the Chians—

PEISETAERUS 880 I love the way the Chians get tacked on everywhere.[74]

PRIEST 881 —and to the hero-birds and to the heroes' children: to the swamphen and the woodpecker and the pelican and the phlexis and the grouse and the peacock and the eleas and the bascas and the elasas and the heron and the cataract-bird and the blackcap and the titmouse—[75]

PEISETAERUS 889 Stop, go to hell, stop calling them! Ugh, ugh! What sort of victim are you inviting sea-eagles and vultures to, you wretch? Can't you see that a single kite could snatch this up and be off with it? Get away from us, you and your garlands. I'll do this sacrifice myself, on my own.

PRIEST

895 Then once again, it seems,
I must sing you a second song,
god-fearing and holy, over the holy water,
and call on the blessed ones—just one of them,
if you're going to have enough to eat.
For the victims we've got here
are nothing but beard and horns.

71 Colaenis was a cult title of Artemis; the Greek Akalanthis, "goldfinch," sounds much like it.
72 Sabazius was a Phrygian god, hence the Phrygian finch; the Great Mother becomes an ostrich, in Greek "the great sparrow."
73 Cleocritus, an Athenian apparently mocked for an ostrich-like build.
74 The Chians, loyal allies of Athens, were included in Athenian public prayers.
75 Some of these birds (phlexis, eleas, bascas, elasas) can no longer be identified.

PEISETAERUS 903 As we sacrifice, let's pray to the feathered gods.

POET

904 Cloudcuckooland the blessed,
sing her glory, Muse,
in the music of your hymns.

PEISETAERUS 906 Where's this thing from? Tell me, who are you?

POET

907 I am one who pours forth a song
of honey-tongued verses,
a zealous servant of the Muses,
as Homer has it.

PEISETAERUS 911 So you're a slave, and you've got long hair?[76]

POET 912 No, no. All of us poets are "zealous servants of the Muses," as Homer has it.

PEISETAERUS 915 No wonder your little cloak is so "zealous" too: it's worked itself full of holes. But tell me, poet, what damned business brought you up here?[77]

POET 917 I've composed songs for your Cloudcuckooland: lots of fine circle-dances, and maiden-songs, and songs in the manner of Simonides.[78]

PEISETAERUS 920 And when did you compose these? Since when?

POET 921 Long, long have I been singing this city's glory.

PEISETAERUS 922 But I'm only now holding its tenth-day sacrifice, and I've only just given it its name, like a baby!

76 He takes "servant" literally: slaves in Athens wore their hair short.
77 The Homeric word otrēros, "zealous," puns on tetrēmenos, "full of holes."
78 Circle-dances (dithyrambs) and maiden-songs were genres of choral lyric; Simonides was a famous lyric poet.

POET

924 But swift is the word of the Muses,
like the flashing of horses.
And you, father, founder of Aetna,
namesake of holy rites,
give me whatever
with a nod of your head
you're glad to give me, give.[79]

PEISETAERUS 931 This pest is going to give us trouble unless we give him something and get rid of him. You there, you've got a jerkin as well as a tunic: take it off and give it to our clever poet. Here, have the jerkin. You look like you're freezing anyway.

POET

936 This gift the dear Muse
receives not unwillingly.
But you, take to heart
a Pindaric word—

PEISETAERUS 940 The fellow's never going to leave us alone.

POET

941 For among the nomad Scythians
Straton wanders,
who owns no garment shuttle-woven;
without glory goes a jerkin with no tunic.
Mark what I tell you.

PEISETAERUS 946 I've marked that you want the little tunic. Take it off; we have to help the poet. There, take it and go.

POET 948 I'm going. And when I get to the city I'll compose things like this: "Sing, you on the golden throne, the shivering, the freezing city." "To snow-struck plains and many-pathed I came. Alalai!"

79 A parody of Pindar's verses to Hieron of Syracuse, founder of Aetna, whose name echoes hiera, "holy rites."

PEISETAERUS 952 Well, by Zeus, you've escaped that freezing stuff now that you've got the little tunic! By Zeus, I never expected this pest—that he'd hear about the city so quickly. You, take the holy water and go around again. Let all be silent!

ORACLE-MONGER 959 Don't start the rites on that goat!

PEISETAERUS 960 And who are you?

ORACLE-MONGER Who am I? An oracle-monger.

PEISETAERUS Then go to hell.

ORACLE-MONGER 961 My dear sir, don't make light of divine matters. There's an oracle of Bacis that refers directly to Cloud-cuckooland.[80]

PEISETAERUS 963 Then how come you weren't reciting these oracles before I founded this city?

ORACLE-MONGER 965 Divine power was holding me back.

PEISETAERUS 966 Well, there's nothing like hearing the verses.

ORACLE-MONGER 967 "But when wolves and gray crows dwell together in the same place, between Corinth and Sicyon—"

PEISETAERUS 969 And what have I got to do with Corinthians?

ORACLE-MONGER 970 Bacis was speaking in riddles: he meant the air. "First sacrifice to Pandora a white-fleeced ram; and whoever first comes to interpret my verses, give to him a clean cloak and new sandals—"

PEISETAERUS 974 The sandals are in there too?

ORACLE-MONGER Take the book. "And give him a bowl, and fill his hand with innards."

PEISETAERUS 976 Giving innards is in there too?

ORACLE-MONGER Take the book. "And if, inspired youth, you do as I command, an eagle in the clouds you shall become; but if you do not give, you shall be no turtledove, nor eagle, nor woodpecker."

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80 Bacis, a legendary prophet whose oracles circulated widely in Athens.

PEISETAERUS 980 That's in there too?

ORACLE-MONGER Take the book.

PEISETAERUS 981 Well, your oracle's nothing like this one, which I copied down from Apollo's: "But when uninvited there comes a man, a fraud, to trouble those who sacrifice and to hanker after the innards, then you must strike him between the ribs—"

ORACLE-MONGER 986 I think you're talking nonsense.

PEISETAERUS Take the book. "And spare him not at all, not even an eagle in the clouds, not if he be Lampon, not if he be the great Diopeithes."[81]

ORACLE-MONGER 989 That's in there too?

PEISETAERUS Take the book. Get out of here, won't you? Go to hell!

ORACLE-MONGER 990 Oh no, poor me!

PEISETAERUS 991 Run off and do your oracle-mongering somewhere else, won't you?

METON 992 I've come to you—

PEISETAERUS Another pest! And what are you here to do? What's the shape of your plan? What's the idea? Why the tragic boots for the trip?

METON 995 I want to survey the air for you and divide it up into plots.

PEISETAERUS 996 By the gods, and who among men are you?

METON 997 Who am I? Meton, known to Greece and to Colonus.[82]

PEISETAERUS 998 Tell me, what are these things you've got?

METON 999 Rulers for the air. You see, the air, taken as a whole, is shaped very much like a baking lid. So I apply this curved ruler from above, set the compass in—you follow?

81 Diopeithes, a well-known Athenian oracle-monger.
82 Meton, a famous Athenian astronomer and geometer who devised a calendar cycle and built a fountain at Colonus.

PEISETAERUS [1004] I don't follow.

METON I'll lay the straight ruler on and measure, so that your circle becomes a square, with a marketplace in the middle, and straight roads leading into it, right to the very center; just as from a star, which is itself round, straight rays shine out in every direction.

PEISETAERUS [1009] The man's a Thales! Meton—[83]

METON [1010] What is it?

PEISETAERUS You know I'm fond of you. Take my advice and quietly slip off down the road.

METON [1012] Why, what's the danger?

PEISETAERUS It's like Sparta: they're expelling foreigners, and some have already been sent packing. There's a lot of beating going on around town.

METON [1014] You're not having a civil war, are you?

PEISETAERUS [1015] No, by Zeus, not at all.

METON Then what?

PEISETAERUS It's been unanimously decided to thrash all frauds.

METON [1017] Then I'd better slip away.

PEISETAERUS By Zeus, yes, though I'm not sure you'll make it in time. They're closing in, right here—these!

METON [1019] Ow, damn it!

PEISETAERUS Didn't I tell you ages ago? Go and measure your way out of here, somewhere else, won't you?

INSPECTOR [1021] Where are the official hosts?

PEISETAERUS Who's this Sardanapalus?[84]

83 Thales of Miletus, the proverbial wise man and mathematician.
84 Sardanapalus, a legendary Assyrian king proverbial for luxury: the Inspector is grandly dressed.

INSPECTOR 1022 I've come here to Cloudcuckooland as inspector, selected by lot with the bean.[85]

PEISETAERUS 1023 An inspector? And who sent you here?

INSPECTOR 1024 A shabby little decree of Teleas.

PEISETAERUS 1025 Tell me: would you like to take your pay and leave without any trouble?

INSPECTOR 1026 By the gods, yes. I really needed to stay home for the Assembly. There's some business I've been handling for Pharnaces.[86]

PEISETAERUS 1029 Take it and go. Here's your pay.

INSPECTOR 1030 What was that?

PEISETAERUS An Assembly about Pharnaces.

INSPECTOR 1031 I call witnesses: I'm being beaten, and I'm an inspector!

PEISETAERUS 1032 Shoo, won't you? Take your two voting urns and get out, won't you? Isn't it outrageous? They're already sending inspectors to the city before we've even sacrificed to the gods!

DECREE-SELLER 1035 "And if a Cloudcuckoolander does wrong to an Athenian—"

PEISETAERUS 1036 What's this new pest of a document?

DECREE-SELLER 1037 I'm a decree-seller, and I've come here to sell you new laws.

PEISETAERUS 1038 Such as?

DECREE-SELLER 1040 "The Cloudcuckoolanders shall use the same measures and weights and decrees as the Olophyxians."

PEISETAERUS 1042 And you'll soon be using what the Ow-ow-yxians use.[87]

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85 Athens sent inspectors (episkopoi) to supervise its subject cities.
86 Pharnaces, a Persian satrap: the Inspector is hinting at his own bribe-taking.
87 Olophyxus was a small town in northern Greece; Peisetaerus twists the name into one formed from ototoi, "ow!," as he starts hitting.

DECREE-SELLER [1043] Hey, what's the matter with you?

PEISETAERUS [1044] Take your laws away, won't you? Today I'll show you some laws that really sting.

INSPECTOR [1046] I summon Peisetaerus for assault, to appear in the month of Munychion.

PEISETAERUS [1047] Really, you? Are you still here?

DECREE-SELLER [1050] "And if anyone drives out the magistrates and does not receive them as laid down on the inscribed pillar _"

PEISETAERUS [1052] Oh, damn it, you're still here too?

INSPECTOR I'll ruin you! I'm suing you for ten thousand drachmas.

PEISETAERUS [1053] And I'll scatter your two urns.

DECREE-SELLER [1054] Remember that evening you took a shit on the inscribed pillar?

PEISETAERUS [1055] Ugh! Somebody grab him! Hey, you, won't you stay put? Let's get away from here as fast as we can and go inside to sacrifice the goat to the gods.

SECOND PARABASIS

The birds proclaim their power, put a price on a bird-seller's head, and promise the judges rewards.

CHORUS

1058 Now to me, the all-seeing
and all-ruling, all mortals
will sacrifice with prayers and vows.
For I watch over all the earth,
and I keep the flourishing crops safe
by killing the brood of beasts of every kind,
who with all-devouring jaws
graze on every growing thing that springs from the bud in the earth,
and on the fruit that sits upon the trees;
and I kill the ones that ruin fragrant gardens
with their hateful havoc,
and creeping things and biting things, all there are,
beneath my wing perish in slaughter.

1072 On this very day, as it happens, there's a proclamation going out: if any of you kills Diagoras of Melos, he gets a talent, and if anyone kills one of the tyrants—the dead ones—he gets a talent. So we want to make a proclamation of our own here. If any of you kills Philocrates of Sparrowdale, he'll get a talent, and if he brings him in alive, four, because he strings finches together and sells them at seven for an obol; then he puffs up thrushes, puts them on display and abuses them; he stuffs feathers up the blackbirds' nostrils; and he likewise catches pigeons and keeps them penned up, and forces them to work as decoys, tied up in a net.[88] 1084 That's the proclamation we want to make. And if any of you keeps birds shut up in his yard, we're telling you: let them go. If you don't obey, you'll be caught by the birds,

88 Diagoras of Melos, a poet with a price on his head for impiety; "Sparrowdale" mocks an Athenian deme name, from strouthos, "sparrow."

and then it'll be your turn to be tied up at our place and work as decoys.

1088 Happy the race of winged
birds, who in winter
wrap themselves in no cloaks;
nor again does the hot, far-shining ray
of stifling summer scorch us;
but in the lap of flowering meadows
and of leaves I make my home,
when the god-sent cicada,
mad with the sun,
shrills his sharp song in the noonday heat.
I winter in hollow caves,
at play with the mountain nymphs;
and in spring we feed on the virgin
white-budding myrtle
and the gardens of the Graces.

1102 We want to say a word to the judges about the prize: all the good things we'll give every one of them if they judge in our favor, so they get far better gifts than Alexander got. First, what every judge craves most: owls from Laurium will never leave you. They'll make their homes with you, nest inside your purses and hatch out small change. Then, on top of that, you'll live as if in temples, because we'll roof your houses with eagles. And if you're allotted some little office and then want to grab something, we'll put a sharp little hawk in your hands. And if you're dining out somewhere, we'll send you extra crops.[89] 1114 But if you don't vote for us, get yourselves bronze crescents forged to wear on your heads, the way statues do. Because any of you without a crescent, especially when you're wearing a white cloak, will pay the price to us: you'll be shat on by every bird there is.[90]

89 Athenian silver coins, minted from Laurium silver, bore an owl; a temple's pediment was called an "eagle"; Alexander is Paris, bribed by the goddesses he judged; a bird's crop is a pouch for storing food.

90 Bronze crescents were fixed on statues' heads to keep birds off them.

THIRD LYRIC SCENE

Messengers report the finished wall and an intruding god; Peisetaerus abuses Iris, and a herald reports bird-mania on earth.

PEISETAERUS 1118 The sacrifices have turned out well for us, birds. But there's still no messenger from the wall to tell us how things are going up there. Wait, here's someone running, panting like a racer at Olympia.

FIRST MESSENGER 1122 Where, where is he, where where where is he, where where where is he, where—where's Peisetaerus, our ruler?

PEISETAERUS 1123 Right here.

FIRST MESSENGER 1124 Your wall's been built!

PEISETAERUS Good news.

FIRST MESSENGER 1125 A gorgeous piece of work, utterly magnificent! It's so wide that up on top Proxenides of Boastville and Theogenes could drive two chariots past each other, with horses under them as big as the Wooden Horse.[91]

PEISETAERUS 1129 Heracles!

FIRST MESSENGER 1130 And its length—I measured it myself—is a hundred fathoms.

PEISETAERUS 1131 Poseidon, what length! Who built it that big?

FIRST MESSENGER 1133 Birds, nobody else. There wasn't an Egyptian brick-carrier or stonemason or carpenter there; they did it with their own hands—I was amazed. From Libya came about thirty thousand cranes that had swallowed stones for the foundations, and the corncrakes dressed them with their beaks. Another ten thousand storks carried bricks, and the plovers and the other river-birds carried water up from below into the air.

PEISETAERUS 1142 And who carried the mortar for them?

91 Proxenides, a braggart; "Boastville" parodies his deme name, built on kompos, "boast."

FIRST MESSENGER Herons, in hods.

PEISETAERUS 1143 And how did they get the mortar into the hods?

FIRST MESSENGER 1144 That, my good man, was worked out very cleverly: the geese dug their feet in like shovels and threw it into the hods.

PEISETAERUS 1147 Well, what can't a good pair of feet do?

FIRST MESSENGER 1148 And by Zeus, the ducks put on aprons and carried bricks, and the swallows flew up with the trowel behind them, like little apprentices, carrying the mortar in their mouths.

PEISETAERUS 1152 Why would anyone hire hired hands anymore? Let's see, what else? Who did the woodwork on the wall?

FIRST MESSENGER 1154 The carpenters were birds: very skilled woodpeckers, who hacked out the gates with their beaks, and the din of their hacking was like a shipyard. And now the whole place is fitted with gates and bolted and guarded all around; it's patrolled, the bell goes the rounds, sentries are posted everywhere, and there are beacons in the towers. But I'm going to run off and wash. You take care of the rest yourself.

CHORUS 1164 Hey, what are you doing? Are you amazed the wall's been walled so fast?

PEISETAERUS 1166 By the gods, I am, and it deserves it. Honestly, it looks to me just like a pack of lies. But here comes a guard, a messenger from up there, rushing toward us with a war-dance glare.

SECOND MESSENGER 1170 Oh no, oh no! Oh no, oh no! Oh no, oh no!

PEISETAERUS 1171 What's all this?

SECOND MESSENGER Something terrible has happened to us. One of the gods, one of Zeus' gods, just flew in through the gates into the air, slipping past the jackdaws on day watch.

PEISETAERUS 1175 What a terrible, outrageous thing he's done! Which of the gods?

SECOND MESSENGER 1176 We don't know. That it had wings—that we know.

PEISETAERUS 1177 Then shouldn't you have sent the border patrol after him right away?

SECOND MESSENGER 1178 But we did send them: thirty thousand hawks, mounted archers, and every one of them is moving out with talons curved—kestrel, buzzard, vulture, nighthawk, eagle. With the rush of wings and the whirring, the sky is shaking as they hunt for the god. And he's not far off; he's somewhere around here already.

PEISETAERUS 1185 Shouldn't we get slings and bows? Here, all attendants! Shoot! Hit him! Somebody give me a sling!

CHORUS

1189 War is rising, war beyond words,
between me and the gods. Come, everyone, guard
the cloud-wrapped air that Erebus begot,
so no god slips past you crossing here.

1196 ...Everyone, keep watch, look all around you, because close by now you can hear the winged whirring of a god on high.

PEISETAERUS 1199 You there, where, where, where are you flying? Stay quiet! Keep still! Stop right there! Halt! Who are you? Where are you from? You have to say where you come from.

IRIS 1202 I come from the gods, the Olympians.

PEISETAERUS 1203 And your name? What are you—a ship or a bonnet?

IRIS 1204 Swift Iris.

PEISETAERUS The *Paralus* or the *Salaminia*?[92]

IRIS 1205 What's that supposed to mean?

92 The *Paralus* and the *Salaminia* were Athens' two fast state ships.

PEISETAERUS Won't some buzzard fly up and arrest this one?

IRIS [1206] Arrest me? What on earth is this nonsense?

PEISETAERUS [1207] You're going to howl for this, long and loud.

IRIS [1208] This is very peculiar.

PEISETAERUS Which gate did you come through into the wall, you filthy wretch?

IRIS [1210] By Zeus, I've no idea which gate.

PEISETAERUS [1211] Did you hear how she's playing dumb? Did you report to the jackdaw-captains? Won't you answer? Do you have a stamped pass from the storks?

IRIS [1213] What is this nonsense?

PEISETAERUS [1214] You didn't get one?

IRIS Are you quite right in the head?

PEISETAERUS And no bird-officer on duty stuck a pass on you either?

IRIS [1216] No, by Zeus, nobody's stuck anything on me, mister.

PEISETAERUS [1217] And so you just fly on through like this, without a word, through a city that's not yours, and through the void?

IRIS [1219] Well, what other way are gods supposed to fly?

PEISETAERUS [1220] By Zeus, I've no idea—but not this way. You're breaking the law even now. Do you realize that of all the Irises there are, you'd be the one most justly caught and put to death, if you got what you deserve?

IRIS [1224] But I'm immortal.

PEISETAERUS You'd have died all the same. It'd be a terrible state of affairs, it seems to me, if we rule everything else while you gods run riot and still don't grasp that it's your turn now to obey your betters. Now tell me: where are you sailing those two wings of yours?

IRIS 1230 Me? I'm flying to mankind from my father, to tell them to sacrifice to the Olympian gods, to slaughter sheep on ox-offering altars and fill the streets with the savor of sacrifice.

PEISETAERUS 1233 What are you talking about? Which gods?

IRIS 1234 Which? Us, the gods in heaven.

PEISETAERUS 1235 So you're gods?

IRIS Well, what other god is there?

PEISETAERUS 1236 Birds are mankind's gods now, and it's to them men must sacrifice—not, by Zeus, to Zeus.

IRIS 1238 Fool, fool, do not stir the gods' dread wrath, lest Justice with the mattock of Zeus overturn your whole race root and branch, and smoky flame burn your body and the enfolding walls of your house to cinders with Licymnian bolts![93]

PEISETAERUS 1243 Listen, you: stop that bubbling and frothing. Keep still. Let's see now: do you think it's some Lydian or Phrygian you're frightening with talk like that? Do you realize that if Zeus gives me any more trouble, I'll burn his halls and the houses of Amphion to cinders with fire-bearing eagles? I'll send swamphens up to heaven against him, birds dressed in leopard skins, more than six hundred of them. Once upon a time a single Porphyrion gave him plenty of trouble. And as for you, if you give me any trouble, I'll start with the servant: I'll hoist her legs and fuck Iris herself between the thighs, and she'll be amazed how an old man like me can still stand up stiff as a warship's triple ram.[94]

IRIS 1257 Damn you, mister, may you burst, words and all!

PEISETAERUS 1258 Shoo, won't you? Quick now! Shoo! Scat!

IRIS 1259 My father will put a stop to your insolence, I swear it!

93 "Licymnian" thunderbolts recall a lightning strike in Euripides' tragedy *Licymnius*; Iris is speaking in tragic style.
94 Peisetaerus answers in tragic style himself; Amphion was a legendary king of Thebes.

PEISETAERUS 1260 Oh dear, poor me! Why not fly off somewhere else and burn some younger man to cinders?

CHORUS

1263 We've shut the Zeus-born gods out:
no more shall they cross my city,
and no more shall any mortal
send up to the gods from the ground here
the smoke of sacrifice.

PEISETAERUS 1269 It's worrying about that herald who went off to the mortals, if he's never coming back.

HERALD 1271 Peisetaerus! Blessed one! Wisest of men! Most famous! Wisest! Smoothest! Thrice-blessed! Give me the word!

PEISETAERUS 1273 What are you saying?

HERALD 1274 With this golden crown, for your wisdom, all the peoples crown you and honor you.

PEISETAERUS 1276 I accept. But why do the peoples honor me like this?

HERALD 1277 You founder of the glorious city in the sky, you don't know how much honor you've won among mankind, or how many lovers of this land you have! Before you founded this city, all mankind was Sparta-mad: they grew their hair long, went hungry, went unwashed, played Socrates and carried Spartan sticks. But now they've turned right around and gone bird-mad, and they get such a kick out of it that they copy everything birds do. First thing at dawn they all fly out of bed together, just like us, to go and feed; then they all swoop down together on the papers, and there they graze on decrees. They were so openly bird-mad that plenty of them even had bird names given to them.[95] 1292 One lame shopkeeper was called Partridge; Menippus was named Swallow; one-eyed Opuntius

95 Spartan affectations (long hair, austerity, the Spartan staff) were fashionable among some Athenians; the philosopher Socrates was known for going hungry and unwashed.

was Raven; Philocles was Lark; Theogenes, Fox-Goose; Lycurgus, Ibis; Chaerephon, Bat; Syracosius, Magpie; and Meidias there was called Quail—and he did look like a quail that's been bashed on the head by a quail-flicker. And they were so in love with birds that they all sang songs with a swallow worked in somewhere, or a duck, or a goose, or a dove, or wings, or even just a little bit of feather. That's how things are down there.[96] 1304 And one thing more, I'm telling you: more than ten thousand of them are going to come here from down there, wanting wings and the ways of hook-clawed birds. So you'll need to get wings from somewhere for the settlers.

PEISETAERUS 1308 Then, by Zeus, this is no time for us to stand around. You, go as fast as you can and fill all the hampers and baskets with wings. Let Manes bring the wings out to me, and I'll welcome the people as they arrive.

SECOND CHORAL SONG

The chorus sings of the crowds coming to settle while Peisetaerus hurries the servants along with baskets of wings.

CHORUS 1313 Soon enough some human / will call this city "crowded with men."

PEISETAERUS 1315 If only our luck holds.

CHORUS 1316 Love for my city has everyone in its grip.

PEISETAERUS 1317 Bring them faster, I said!

CHORUS

1318 For what good thing isn't here
for a man who comes to settle?
Wisdom, Desire, Ambrosia, the Graces,
and the sunny face
of gentle-hearted Peace and Quiet.

96 All contemporary Athenians: Chaerephon was Socrates' pale, sickly-looking follower; Meidias gambled on quail-flicking, a game of striking quails on the head.

PEISETAERUS 1323 How lazily you serve! / Won't you get a move on?

CHORUS 1325 Someone bring a basket of wings, and quick! / And you, get him going again—

PEISETAERUS 1327 Yes, by hitting him like this.

CHORUS 1328 He's as slow as a donkey.

PEISETAERUS 1329 That's because Manes is useless.

CHORUS

1330 And you, first sort out
these wings in proper order:
the musical ones together, the prophetic ones,
and the sea birds. Then be sure
to size up each man and fit him with wings to suit.

THIRD EPISODE

Peisetaerus deals with three would-be settlers: a father-beater, the poet Cinesias, and an informer he whips away.

PEISETAERUS 1335 By the kestrels, I can't keep my hands off you any longer, seeing how useless and slow you are.

FATHER-BEATER

1337 Oh, to become a high-flying eagle,
to soar above the barren
swell of the gray-blue sea!

PEISETAERUS 1340 Looks like our messenger's report was no lie: here comes someone singing about eagles.

FATHER-BEATER 1342 Aah! There's nothing sweeter than flying! I'm bird-mad, I'm flying, and I want to live with you. I'm longing for your laws.

PEISETAERUS 1346 Which laws? Birds have plenty of laws.

FATHER-BEATER 1347 All of them. But most of all the one where birds think it's fine to throttle your father and bite him.

PEISETAERUS [1349] Yes, by Zeus, we think it's very manly indeed when a chick has beaten up his father.

FATHER-BEATER [1351] That's exactly why I've moved here: I want to throttle my father and get everything he's got.

PEISETAERUS [1353] Ah, but we birds have an ancient law, written on the storks' law-tablets: once the father stork has raised all his storklings and got them ready to fly, the chicks have to feed their father in turn.

FATHER-BEATER [1358] Well, by Zeus, a fat lot of good coming here did me, if I have to feed my father too!

PEISETAERUS [1360] Not at all. Since you came here with good intentions, my friend, I'll fit you out with wings like an orphan bird. And I'll give you some advice, young man, and not bad advice either: the kind I was taught myself when I was a boy. Don't hit your father. Here, take this wing, and this spur in your other hand, and think of this crest as a rooster's comb. Now stand guard, go soldiering, earn your own keep on army pay, and let your father live. Since you're so keen on fighting, fly off to the Thracian front and fight there.[97]

FATHER-BEATER [1370] By Dionysus, I think you're talking sense. I'll do as you say.

PEISETAERUS [1371] Then you'll be showing some sense, by Zeus.

CINESIAS [1373] Up I fly to Olympus on weightless wings; / I fly now down one path of song, now another—

PEISETAERUS [1375] This job is going to need a whole cargo of wings.

CINESIAS [1376] with fearless mind and body, pursuing a new—

97 At Athens the sons of men killed in war were given a full set of armor by the city when they came of age; here the wing is a shield, the spur a spear, the crest a helmet plume.

PEISETAERUS 1377 Greetings, Cinesias, man of linden-wood! Why are you whirling that crooked foot of yours around and around in a circle over here?[98]

CINESIAS 1380 I want to become a bird, a clear-voiced nightingale.

PEISETAERUS 1381 Stop singing and tell me what you mean.

CINESIAS 1382 I want you to give me wings, so I can soar aloft and fetch fresh preludes from the clouds, air-whirled and snow-swept.

PEISETAERUS 1386 You can get preludes from the clouds?

CINESIAS 1387 Why, our whole art hangs from them! The brilliant parts of a dithyramb are airy and murky and dark-gleaming and wing-whirled. Listen and you'll soon see.

PEISETAERUS 1391 No, I really won't.

CINESIAS Oh yes you will, by Heracles. I'll take you through the whole of the air.

1393 Phantoms of winged,
sky-coursing,
long-necked birds—

PEISETAERUS 1395 Whoa there!

CINESIAS 1396 leaping along the sea-paths, / may I travel on the breath of the winds—

PEISETAERUS 1398 By Zeus, I'll put a stop to your breath!

CINESIAS

1399 now striding down the southern road,
now bringing my body close to the North Wind,
cutting a harborless furrow through the sky—

1401 Very charming, old man, and very clever of you.

PEISETAERUS 1402 What, don't you enjoy being wing-whirled?

98 Cinesias, a dithyrambic poet mocked for being skinny and frail (linden is a light, flimsy wood); dithyrambs were performed by choruses dancing in a circle.

CINESIAS 1403 Is that how you treat a trainer of circular choruses, a man the tribes are always fighting over?

PEISETAERUS 1405 Well then, would you like to stay here with us and train a chorus of flying birds for Leotrophides, from the tribe of Cecropis?[99]

CINESIAS 1407 You're making fun of me, that's obvious. But I won't stop, you can be sure of that, until I've got my wings and gone racing through the air.

INFORMER 1410 Who are these birds with nothing, with their dappled wings? / Long-winged, dappled swallow!

PEISETAERUS 1412 This is no small trouble that's woken up. Here comes another one, warbling his way over.

INFORMER 1415 Long-winged, dappled—once again!

PEISETAERUS 1416 I think he's singing his drinking song to that cloak of his. He looks like he needs quite a few swallows.[100]

INFORMER 1418 Who's the one who gives wings to new arrivals around here?

PEISETAERUS 1419 He's right here. But you'll have to tell me what you need.

INFORMER 1420 Wings, wings, I need wings. Don't make me say it twice.

PEISETAERUS 1421 You're not planning to fly straight to Pellene, are you?[101]

INFORMER 1422 No, by Zeus. I serve summonses in the islands, and I'm an informer—

PEISETAERUS 1423 Lucky you, what a profession!

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99 Leotrophides was another notoriously skinny Athenian. Dithyrambic choruses competed by tribe, and Cecropis was one of Athens' ten tribes.

100 As the proverb says, one swallow doesn't make a spring: his cloak is so threadbare he needs a lot of warm weather.

101 Pellene, a town famous for its warm woolen cloaks, which were given as prizes at its games.

INFORMER 1424 —and a lawsuit-digger. So I need to get wings and go whizzing around the cities serving summonses.

PEISETAERUS 1426 And you'll serve summonses more cleverly with wings?

INFORMER 1427 No, by Zeus. It's so the pirates won't bother me, and so I can fly back from there with the cranes, with a load of lawsuits swallowed for ballast.[102]

PEISETAERUS 1430 So that's the work you do? Tell me, a young man like you, and you make a living informing on foreigners?

INFORMER 1432 What else can I do? I don't know how to dig.

PEISETAERUS 1433 But by Zeus there are other, decent jobs a man your size ought to be making an honest living from, instead of stitching up lawsuits.

INFORMER 1436 My dear sir, don't lecture me, just give me wings.

PEISETAERUS 1437 I'm giving you wings right now, as I talk.

INFORMER And how could you give a man wings with words?

PEISETAERUS 1438 Words give everyone wings.

INFORMER 1439 Everyone?

PEISETAERUS Haven't you heard the fathers in the barbershops, always going on about their boys like this? "It's terrible: Diitrephes has talked my boy into such a flutter that he's all wings for riding horses." And another says his son has taken wing for tragedy, and his mind has flown off.

INFORMER 1446 So people really get wings from words?

PEISETAERUS I'd say so. Words send the mind soaring and lift a man up. And that's how I want to give you wings too, with good words, and turn you to an honest job.

INFORMER 1450 But I don't want to.

PEISETAERUS 1451 Then what will you do?

INFORMER I won't disgrace my family. Informing is the life my grandfather led. Just give me wings, fast, light wings, a hawk's or

a kestrel's, so I can summon the foreigners, bring my charges here, and then fly back over there again.

PEISETAERUS 1456 I get it. What you mean is, the foreigner has already lost his case here before he even arrives.

INFORMER 1458 You get it exactly.

PEISETAERUS 1459 And then, while he's sailing over here, you fly back over there to grab his property.

INFORMER 1460 You've got it all. I have to be just like a spinning top.

PEISETAERUS 1461 I get it: a top. And by Zeus, I happen to have just the thing, some lovely Corcyraean wings.[103]

INFORMER 1464 Oh no, you've got a whip!

PEISETAERUS No, these are wings, and with them I'll set you spinning like a top today.

INFORMER 1466 Oh no!

PEISETAERUS Wing it out of here, won't you? Scram, you damned crook! You'll soon get a bitter taste of your case-twisting crookery. Come on, let's gather up the wings and go.

102 Cranes were believed to swallow stones as ballast for their long migrations.
103 Corcyra (Corfu) was famous for its whips; a top is kept spinning by whipping it.

FOURTH LYRIC SCENE

Prometheus brings secret advice, and the gods' envoys, outmaneuvered, hand over the scepter and Basileia.

CHORUS

1470 Many new and marvelous things
we've flown over,
and strange sights we've seen.
There's a tree that grows,
an outlandish thing, out beyond
Cardia: Cleonymus,
useless for anything,
but big and cowardly.
Every spring it
sprouts its figs and informs,
and every winter, in turn,
it sheds its shields like leaves.[104]

1482 And there's a land, besides,
far off near the Dark itself,
in the land without lamps,
where people lunch with the heroes
and keep them company—
except in the evening.
At that hour it was no longer
safe to run into them.
For if any mortal met
the hero Orestes at night,
he was stripped naked, and struck by him
all down his right side.[105]

PROMETHEUS 1494 Oh no, I hope Zeus doesn't see me! Where's Peisetaerus?

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104 Cardia, a town in Thrace, also means "heart," so Cleonymus grows beyond the heart. "Inform" (sykophantein) contains sykon, "fig."

105 Meeting a hero at night was believed to bring a stroke that paralyzed one side; Orestes is the mugger named in the parabasis.

PEISETAERUS [1495] Hey, what's this? Who's this all muffled up?

PROMETHEUS [1496] Do you see any of the gods behind me here?

PEISETAERUS [1497] No, by Zeus, I don't. But who are you?

PROMETHEUS [1498] So what time of day is it?

PEISETAERUS [1499] What time? A little past noon. But who are you?

PROMETHEUS [1500] Ox-unyoking time, or later?

PEISETAERUS [1501] Ugh, you're making me sick.

PROMETHEUS What's Zeus doing? Clearing the clouds away or piling them up?

PEISETAERUS [1503] Go to hell!

PROMETHEUS All right, then, I'll uncover myself.

PEISETAERUS [1504] Prometheus, my dear friend!

PROMETHEUS Stop it, stop it, don't shout!

PEISETAERUS [1505] Why, what's the matter?

PROMETHEUS Quiet, don't say my name! You'll be the death of me if Zeus sees me here. But so I can tell you everything that's going on up there, take this parasol of mine and hold it up over me, so the gods can't see me.

PEISETAERUS [1510] Ha, ha! Well thought of, and very Promethean of you: real forethought! Get under it quick, and then speak up and don't be afraid.

PROMETHEUS [1513] Listen, then.

PEISETAERUS Go on, I'm listening.

PROMETHEUS [1514] Zeus is finished.

PEISETAERUS Since when, roughly?

PROMETHEUS [1515] Ever since you people settled the air. Not a single human sacrifices anything to the gods anymore, and not a whiff of the savor of burnt thighbones has come up to us since that day. We're fasting with no offerings, as if it were the Thesmophoria. And the foreign gods, starving and screeching like

Illyrians, say they'll march down on Zeus from up above unless he gets the trading posts opened, so that sliced-up innards can be imported.[106]

PEISETAERUS 1525 You mean there are other gods, foreign ones, above you?

PROMETHEUS 1526 Well, if there were no foreigners, where would Execestides have gotten his ancestral god from?[107]

PEISETAERUS 1528 And what's the name of these foreign gods?

PROMETHEUS 1529 Their name? Triballians.[108]

PEISETAERUS I get it. So that's where we get "tribulation" from![109]

PROMETHEUS 1531 Exactly. Now I'll tell you one thing straight. Envoys are going to come here to talk peace, from Zeus and from the Triballians up there. Don't you make a treaty unless Zeus hands the scepter back to the birds and gives you Basileia for your wife.[110]

PEISETAERUS 1537 Who's Basileia?

PROMETHEUS A gorgeous girl, the one who keeps Zeus' thunderbolt for him, and absolutely everything else as well: good counsel, good government, self-control, the dockyards, the name-calling, the paymaster, the three-obol jury pay.[111]

PEISETAERUS 1542 So she keeps everything for him?

PROMETHEUS I'd say so. If you get her from him, you've got everything. That's why I came here, to tell you. I've always been a friend to humans.

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106 The Thesmophoria, a women's festival of Demeter, included a day of fasting.
107 Claiming an ancestral god was part of proving Athenian citizenship.
108 The Triballians were a Thracian tribe; their god appears later as one of the envoys.
109 The Greek pun is on Triballoi and epitribeiēs, "may you be ground to bits."
110 Basileia, "Sovereignty," is pictured as a girl who keeps Zeus' power for him.
111 The paymaster (kōlakretēs) was the Athenian official who paid jurors their three obols a day.

PEISETAERUS 1546 Yes, you're the only god we have to thank for our barbecues.

PROMETHEUS 1547 And I hate all the gods, as you know.

PEISETAERUS 1548 By Zeus, you've always been hated by the gods, that's for sure.

PROMETHEUS 1549 A regular Timon. But I have to run back. Give me the parasol, so that even if Zeus does see me from up there, it'll look like I'm attending a basket-bearer.[112]

PEISETAERUS 1552 Here, take this stool too, and carry it like a stool-bearer.

CHORUS

1553 And near the Shadowfeet there's
a lake, unwashed, where
Socrates calls up souls.
Peisander came there too,
begging to see the soul that
deserted him while he was alive.
For victim he brought a camel-lamb,
cut its throat, just as
Odysseus once did, and stepped back;
and up from below to meet him,
to the camel's gushing gullet,
came Chaerephon the bat.[113]

POSEIDON 1565 Well, there's the town of Cloudcuckooland in view, where we're going as envoys. You there, what are you doing? Wearing your cloak on the left like that? Shift it over to the right, won't you, like this? What's wrong with you, you poor wretch? Were you born a Laespodias? Democracy, democracy,

112 Timon was Athens' famous misanthrope. In processions such as the Panathenaea, girls carrying the sacred baskets were attended by others holding parasols and stools.

113 The Shadowfeet were a fabled people who shaded themselves under their one huge foot. Peisander, a politician mocked as a coward, has lost his nerve (his "soul"); the scene parodies Odysseus calling up the dead with a sacrifice.

where will you lead us in the end, if the gods have gone and elected this fellow?[114]

1572 Will you keep still?

Damn you! I've never seen a god as foreign as you, not by a long way. Well, Heracles, what do we do?

HERACLES 1574 You've heard me say it: I want to throttle the fellow, whoever he is, who walled the gods off.

POSEIDON 1577 But my good man, we were chosen as envoys to make peace.

HERACLES 1578 That makes me want to throttle him twice as much.

PEISETAERUS 1579 Somebody give me the cheese-grater. Bring the silphium. Someone bring cheese. Stoke up the coals.[115]

POSEIDON 1581 We gods, the three of us, bid the man good day.

PEISETAERUS 1582 Hold on, I'm grating the silphium.

HERACLES 1583 Whose meat is this?

PEISETAERUS Some birds who rose up against the democratic birds were found guilty.

HERACLES 1585 And so you're grating silphium on them first?

PEISETAERUS 1586 Oh, hello, Heracles! What can I do for you?

POSEIDON 1587 We've come as envoys from the gods to settle the war.

PEISETAERUS 1589 There's no oil left in the flask.

HERACLES 1590 And bird-meat really ought to be nice and rich.

POSEIDON 1591 You see, we gain nothing from fighting this war. And you, if you were friends with us gods, would have rainwater in your pools, and you'd live in halcyon days forever. We've come with full powers to settle all of this.[116]

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114 Laespodias, an Athenian general apparently mocked for wearing his cloak in an odd way, supposedly to hide his misshapen legs.
115 Silphium, a prized seasoning plant from Cyrene in North Africa, now extinct.
116 Halcyon days: a spell of calm weather in midwinter, when the kingfisher (halcyon) was thought to nest on the sea.

PEISETAERUS [1596] But we never started a war with you before, and now we're willing, if you agree, and provided you're now willing to do what's just, to make a treaty. And what's just is this: Zeus gives the scepter back to us birds. If we can settle on those terms, I invite the envoys to lunch.

HERACLES [1603] That's good enough for me. I vote yes.

POSEIDON [1604] What, you poor fool? You're an idiot and a glutton. Would you rob your own father of his throne?

PEISETAERUS [1606] Really? Won't you gods be more powerful if the birds rule down below? As it is, people hide under the clouds, keep their heads down, and swear false oaths by you. But if you have the birds as allies, whenever a man swears by the raven and by Zeus, the raven will come along on the sly, swoop down on the perjurer, and peck his eye out with one blow.

POSEIDON [1614] By Poseidon, now that's well said.

HERACLES [1615] I think so too.

PEISETAERUS And what do you say?

TRIBALLIAN Nabaisatreu.

PEISETAERUS [1616] See? He approves too. Now listen to another big favor we'll do you. If any human vows a sacrificial victim to one of the gods and then tries to wriggle out of it, saying, "The gods are patient," and out of stinginess doesn't pay up, we'll collect that too.

POSEIDON [1621] Let's see, how?

PEISETAERUS [1622] Whenever this man happens to be counting his bit of cash, or sitting in the bath, a kite will swoop down, snatch the price of two sheep on the sly, and carry it up to the god.

HERACLES [1626] I vote to give the scepter back to them.

POSEIDON [1627] Now ask the Triballian too.

HERACLES [1628] Triballian, are you in favor of a thrashing?

TRIBALLIAN Saunaka baktarikrousa.

HERACLES 1629 He says I'm absolutely right.

POSEIDON 1630 Well, if you two agree, I agree too.

HERACLES 1631 You there, we've agreed to do it, about the scepter.

PEISETAERUS 1632 Oh, and by Zeus, there's another thing I've just remembered. Zeus can keep Hera, but the girl Basileia has to be given to me as my wife.

POSEIDON 1635 You don't want peace at all. Let's go back home.

PEISETAERUS 1636 Little I care. Cook, make the sauce a sweet one.

HERACLES 1638 Poseidon, you madman, where are you off to? Are we going to fight a war over one woman?

POSEIDON 1640 Then what should we do?

HERACLES What? Make peace.

POSEIDON 1641 What, you poor sap? Can't you see you've been tricked all along? You're only hurting yourself, you know. If Zeus hands his rule over to these people and then dies, you'll be a pauper. Because everything Zeus leaves behind when he dies comes to you.

PEISETAERUS 1646 Oh dear, the way he's trying to outsmart you! Come over here to me, so I can tell you something. Your uncle's cheating you, you poor sucker. By law you don't get a hair's worth of your father's estate. You're a bastard, not legitimate.

HERACLES 1651 Me, a bastard? What are you talking about?

PEISETAERUS Yes, you, by Zeus, since your mother was a foreign woman. Otherwise, how do you think Athena could ever be heiress, when she's a daughter, if there were legitimate brothers?[117]

117 At Athens a daughter inherited the estate as "heiress" only when there were no legitimate sons, and children of a non-Athenian mother were not legitimate; Heracles' mother was the mortal Alcmene.

HERACLES 1655 But what if my father leaves me his property when he dies, bastard or not?

PEISETAERUS 1656 The law won't let him. This Poseidon here, the one who's egging you on now, will be the first to lay claim to your father's estate, saying he's the legitimate brother. I'll quote you Solon's law, too: "A bastard shall have no right of kinship if there are legitimate children. If there are no legitimate children, the property shall go to the next of kin."

HERACLES 1667 So I get no share at all of my father's property?

PEISETAERUS 1668 None at all, by Zeus. Tell me, has your father ever presented you to his phratry?[118]

HERACLES 1670 No, not me he hasn't. I've been wondering about that for a long time.

PEISETAERUS 1671 Then why are you gaping up there with murder in your eyes? If you join us, I'll make you ruler of the birds and keep you in bird's milk.

HERACLES 1674 I think what you've been saying about the girl is fair, and has been all along. I'm handing her over to you.

PEISETAERUS 1676 And what do you say?

POSEIDON I vote against.

PEISETAERUS 1677 It all comes down to the Triballian. What do you say?

TRIBALLIAN 1678 Pretty girly, big-big queenie Basilinau, to birdy me handover.[119]

HERACLES 1679 He says hand her over.

POSEIDON 1680 No, by Zeus, he doesn't say hand her over, unless he's just twittering like the swallows.

118 A phratry was a hereditary brotherhood; a father's presenting his son to it was the standard proof of legitimacy.

119 Here the Triballian mangles real Greek (roughly "the pretty girl and great Basileia I hand over to the birds"), so his words are rendered as broken English.

PEISETAERUS 1682 Right: so he says hand her over to the swallows.

POSEIDON 1683 All right, you two make peace and come to terms. Since you both agree, I'll keep quiet.

HERACLES 1685 We agree to grant everything you ask. But come with us to heaven yourself, so you can take Basileia and everything else up there.

PEISETAERUS 1688 Well, these birds got chopped up just in time for the wedding.

HERACLES 1689 Do you want me to stay here and roast this meat in the meantime? You go on.

POSEIDON 1691 Roast the meat? That's pure gluttony talking. Aren't you coming with us?

HERACLES 1692 I'd have had a lovely time of it, though.

PEISETAERUS 1693 Now someone bring me a wedding cloak, over here.

CHORUS

1694 And in Phanae, near the
Water-Clock, there lives a crooked
race of Tongue-Bellies,
who reap and sow
and harvest with their tongues,
and pick figs too.
They're a foreign breed,
Gorgiases and Philippuses.
And thanks to those Tongue-Bellies,
those Philippuses,
everywhere in Attica
the tongue is cut out separately.[120]

120 Phanae suggests phainein, "to denounce"; the Water-Clock timed speeches in court; "picking figs" again plays on informing. Gorgias was the famous Sicilian orator, Philippus his follower. At sacrifices the victim's tongue was cut out and set aside separately.

FOURTH EPISODE

A messenger announces that Peisetaerus is arriving with his bride and Zeus' thunderbolt.

THIRD MESSENGER 1706 You who fare well in everything, beyond what words can tell, thrice-blessed winged race of birds, welcome your ruler to his happy halls! He's on his way, more radiant than any star that ever shone, all-gleaming, in its golden-rayed home; not even the far-flung blaze of the sun's rays ever shone out so bright as he does now, coming with a woman whose beauty is past all telling, brandishing the thunderbolt, Zeus' winged shaft. A fragrance beyond naming spreads to the depths of the circling sky, a lovely sight; and breezes of incense waft the coiling smoke away. And here he is himself. Now the divine Muse must open her holy mouth in auspicious song.

EXODOS

The birds celebrate the wedding of Peisetaerus and Basileia and hail him as highest of the gods.

CHORUS

1720 Back! Part! Make way! Give room!
Fly around
the blessed man with blessed fortune.
Oh, oh, the youth of him, the beauty!
What a blessed marriage you've made for this city!

1726 Great, great is the good fortune that holds the race of birds, thanks to this man. Come, welcome him and Basileia with wedding hymns and bridal songs.

1731 Once the Fates laid
the great ruler of the gods,
lord of the lofty thrones,
to bed with Olympian Hera
to a wedding song like this.
Hymen, Hymenaeus, oh!
Hymen, Hymenaeus, oh![121]

1737 And Eros, in full bloom,
on golden wings, held the reins
drawn tight and steered,
groomsman at the wedding of Zeus
and fortunate Hera.
Hymen, Hymenaeus, oh!
Hymen, Hymenaeus, oh!

PEISETAERUS 1743 Your hymns delight me, your songs delight me, and I admire your words. Come now, sing too of the rumbling thunder of the earth, and Zeus' fiery lightning, and the terrible white-flashing thunderbolt.

CHORUS

1748 Great golden light of the lightning,
immortal fire-bearing spear of Zeus,
deep-roaring thunders of the earth,
bringers of rain as well,
with which this man now shakes the earth!
Through you he has mastered all things,
and holds Basileia, who sat at Zeus' side.
Hymen, Hymenaeus, oh!

121 The traditional wedding refrain, calling on Hymen or Hymenaeus, god of weddings.

PEISETAERUS

Follow the wedding now,
all you feathered tribes
of my fellow flock, to Zeus' floor
and the marriage bed.
Reach out your hand,
my blessed one, take hold
of my wings and dance with me;
I'll lift you and carry you high.

CHORUS

Alalalai! Ie paion!
Tenella, glorious in victory,
highest of the gods![122]

122 "Tenella" imitates the twang of a lyre; it opened a famous victory hymn by the poet Archilochus.