

Five Comedies Of

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ARISTOPHANES

The Birds The Frogs The Clouds
The Wasps Lysistrata

ANCHOR A57



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Five Comedies of

ARISTOPHANES

Translated by Benjamin Bickley Rogers

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With Rogers' Introductions and Notes

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Editor's Note

B. B. Rogers' notes have been selected, edited, and abridged for this edition. Rogers' own words have been kept in nearly every case, though in a few cases his notes have been paraphrased. A few additional brief notes have been supplied by the editor.

A. J. C.

THE BIRDS

INTRODUCTION

The Birds was exhibited at the Great Dionysia in the year 414 B.C. It was placed second of the three competitors; the prize was awarded to the *Revellers* of Ameipsias, a drama otherwise unknown.

At this time the Sicilian expedition was in the full tide of success and was apparently on the point of obtaining a triumphant issue. Athens was full of the wildest speculations and the most far-reaching ambitions. These feelings are mirrored in the present comedy. Two elderly Athenians leave the city and go to sojourn with the Birds, whom they persuade to claim the sovereignty of the world and to build up an enormous wall in the Mid-air, so that no sacrifices offered by men can henceforth reach the sky; and the Gods are presently starved into submission.

Thus did Aristophanes caricature the high schemes and ambitions which were then in the air; not as *encouraging* them, for his caricature is fantastic and ludicrous in the extreme; yet not as *discouraging* them, since even his fantastic adventure is crowned with a brilliant success.

Characters of the Drama

PEISTHETAERUS

EUELPIDES

THE PLOVER-PAGE OF DUNLIN

THE HOOPOE

CHORUS OF BIRDS

PRIEST

POET

ORACLE-MONGER

METON

COMMISSIONER

STATUTE-SELLER

MESSENGER

GUARD

IRIS

HERALD

SIRE-STRIKER

CINESIAS

SYCOPHANT

PROMETHEUS

POSEIDON

HERACLES

TRIBALLIAN

SERVANT

THE BIRDS

A desolate scene. In the background we see a solitary tree, and a sheer rock rising like a wall. In front are two tired old Athenians, each carrying a bird in his hand. The one with a crow is PEISTHETAERUS; the other with a jackdaw, EUELPIDES. The birds have guided them from Athens, but now seem lost, pointing different ways, and sometimes gaping up into the air. In truth, they have reached their goal, but their masters do not know that; and the dialogue is commenced by EUELPIDES, apostrophizing his jackdaw.

EUELPIDES. Straight on do you bid me go, where the tree stands?

PEISTHETAERUS. O hang it all! mine's croaking back again.

EUELPIDES. Why are we wandering up and down, you rogue?
This endless spin will make an end of us.

PEISTHETAERUS. To think that I, poor fool, at a crow's bidding,
Should trudge about, an hundred miles and more!

EUELPIDES. To think that I, poor wretch, at a daw's bidding,
Should wear the very nails from off my feet!

PEISTHETAERUS. Why, where we are, I've not the least idea.

EUELPIDES. Could you from hence find out your fatherland?

PEISTHETAERUS. No, that would pose even—Excectides!¹

EUELPIDES. O, here's a nuisance!

PEISTHETAERUS. Go *you* there, then, friend.

EUELPIDES. I call Philocrates a regular cheat,

The fool that sells the bird-trays in the market.

He swore these two would lead us straight to Tereus,
The hoopoe, made a bird in that same market.²

So then this daw, this son of Tharraleides,³

We bought for an obol, and that crow for three.

But what knew they? Nothing, but how to—bite!
Where are you gaping now? Do you want to lead us
Against the rocks? There's no road here, I tell you.

PEISTHETAERUS. No, nor yet here; not even the tiniest path.

EUELPIDES. Well, but what says your crow about the road?

PEISTHETAERUS. By Zeus, she croaks quite differently now.

EUELPIDES (*shouting*). *What does she say about the road?*

PEISTHETAERUS.

She says

She'll gnaw my fingers off; that's all she says.

EUELPIDES. Now isn't it a shame that when we are here

Ready and willing as two men can be

To go to the ravens, we can't find the way.⁴

For we are sick, spectators, with a sickness

Just the reverse of that which Sacas has.⁵

He, no true townsman, would perforce press in;

Whilst we, with rights of tribe and race unchallenged,

Townsmen mid townsmen, no man scaring us,

Spread both our—feet, and flew away from home.

Not that we hate our city, as not being

A prosperous mighty city, free for all

To spend their wealth in, paying fines and fees.

Aye, the cicadas chirp upon the boughs

One month, or two; but our Athenians chirp

Over their lawsuits all their whole life long,

That's why we are journeying on this journey now,

Trudging along with basket, pot, and myrtles,

To find some quiet easy-going spot,

Where we may settle down, and dwell in peace.

Tereus, the hoopoe, is our journey's aim,

To learn if he, in any place he has flown to,

Has seen the sort of city that we want.

PEISTHETAERUS. You there!

EUELPIDES.

What now?

PEISTHETAERUS.

My crow keeps croaking upwards

Ever so long.

EUELPIDES. And here's my jackdaw gaping

Up in the air, as if to show me something.

There must be birds about, I am sure of that.
Let's make a noise and we shall soon find out.

PEISTHETAERUS. Then harkye; bang your leg against the rock.

EUELPIDES. And you, your head; and there'll be twice the noise.

PEISTHETAERUS. Well, take a stone and knock.

EUELPIDES.

Yes, I'll do that.

Boy! Boy!

PEISTHETAERUS. Eh! What! do you call the hoopoe "Boy"?
You should call "Whoop-ho there," not "Boy" of course.

EUELPIDES. O, Whoop-ho there! What, must I knock again?
Whoop-ho!

(A door suddenly opens in the rock, and an actor emerges, wearing a head-dress or mask representing the head of a DUNLIN or PLOVER-PAGE with a long and wide-gaping beak.)

PLOVER-PAGE. Whoever are these? Who calls my master?

EUELPIDES. Apollo shield us, what a terrible gape!

PLOVER-PAGE. These be two bird-catchers. O dear, O dear!

EUELPIDES (*aside*). As nasty-speaking, as unpleasant-looking!

PLOVER-PAGE. Ye shall both die!

EUELPIDES.

O, we're not men.

PLOVER-PAGE.

What then?

EUELPIDES. Well, I'm the Panic-struck, a Libyan bird.

PLOVER-PAGE. Nonsense!

EUELPIDES. No nonsense: look for yourself and see.

PLOVER-PAGE. And *he*—what bird is *he*? come, won't you answer?

PEISTHETAERUS. I? I'm a pheasant, and a yellow-tailed one.

EUELPIDES. But O, by all the Gods, whatever are you?

PLOVER-PAGE. A serving-bird.

EUELPIDES.

What, vanquished by some gamecock

In fight?

PLOVER-PAGE. No, but my master, when he first
 Became a hoopoe, prayed that I might turn
 Into a bird, to be his servant still.

EUELPIDES. What, does a bird require a serving-bird?

PLOVER-PAGE. *He* does, as having been a man, I fancy.
 So when he wants to taste Phaleric sardines,
 I run for the sardines, catching up a dish.
 Does he want soup? then where's the pot and ladle?
 I run for the ladle.

EUELPIDES. A regular running-page.
 Now harkye, Plover-page, run in and call
 Your master out.

PLOVER-PAGE. Great Zeus! he has just been eating
 Myrtles and midges, and is gone to roost.

EUELPIDES. But still, do wake him.

PLOVER-PAGE. Well I know he won't
 Like to be waked, still for your sake I'll do it. *(Exit)*

PEISTHETAERUS. Confound the bird! he frightened me to death.

EUELPIDES. O dear! O dear! my heart went pit-a-pat,
 My daw's gone too.

PEISTHETAERUS (*severely*). Gone! O you coward you,
 You *let him go!*

EUELPIDES. Well, didn't you fall down,
 And let your crow go?

PEISTHETAERUS. No, I didn't. No!

EUELPIDES. Where is she then?

PEISTHETAERUS. She flew away herself.

EUELPIDES. You didn't let her go. You're a brave boy!

HOOPOE (*within*). Throw wide the wood, that I may issue
 forth!

*(A turn of the eccyclema brings out the HOOPOE, together
 with a portion of his dwelling, viz., a little copse.)*

EUELPIDES. O Heracles, why what in the world is this?
 What feathering's here? What style of triple-cresting?

HOOPOE. Who be the folk that seek me?

EUELPIDES. **The Twelve Gods**
Would seem to have wrought your ruin.

HOOPOE. What, do you jeer me,
Seeing the way I'm feathered? Strangers, I
Was once a man.

EUELPIDES. It's not at you we're laughing.

HOOPOE. What is it then?

EUELPIDES. Your beak looks rather funny.

HOPOE. This is the way that Sophocles disfigures
The manly form of Tereus in his Play.

EUELPIDES. What, are you Tereus? Are you bird or peacock?

HOOROE. I am a bird.

EUELPIDES. Then, where are all your feathers?

HOOROE. They've fallen off!

EUELPIDES. What! from disease, or why?

HOOPOE. No, but in winter-time all birds are wont
To moult their feathers, and then fresh ones grow.
But tell me what *ye* are.

EUELPIDES. We? mortal men.

HOOROE. And of what race?

EUELPIDES. Whence the brave galleys come.

HOOPOE. Not dicasts, are ye?

EUELPIDES. No, the other sort.

We're anti-dicasts.

HOOPOE. Grows that seedling there?

EUELPIDES. Aye in the country you can find a few,
If you search closely.

HOOPOE. But what brings you hither?

EUELPIDES. To talk with you a little.

HOOPOE. What about?

EUCLIPIDES. You were a man at first, as we are now,
And had your creditors, as we have now,
And loved to shirk your debts, as we do now;
And then you changed your nature, and became
A bird, and flew round land and sea, and know
All that men feel, and all that birds feel too.

That's why we are come as suppliants here, to ask
If you can tell us of some city, soft
As a thick rug, to lay us down within.

HOOPOE. Seek ye a mightier than the Cranaan town?

EUELPIDES. A mightier, no; a more commodious, yes.

HOOPOE. Aristocratic?

EUELPIDES. Anything but that!
I loathe the very name of Scellias' son.⁶

HOOPOE. What sort of city would ye like?

EUELPIDES. Why, one
Where my worst trouble would be such as this;
A friend at daybreak coming to my door
And calling out *O by Olympian Zeus,*
Take your bath early: then come round to me,
You and your children, to the wedding banquet
I'm going to give. Now pray don't disappoint me,
Else, keep your distance, when my money's-gone.

HOOPOE. Upon my word, you are quite in love with troubles!
And you?

PEISTHETAERUS. I love the like.

HOOPOE. But tell me what.

PEISTHETAERUS. To have the father of some handsome lad
Come up and chide me with complaints like these,
Fine things I hear of you, Stilbonides,
You met my son returning from the baths,
And never kissed, or hugged, or fondled him,
You, his paternal friend! You're a nice fellow.

HOOPOE. Poor Poppet, you are in love with ills indeed.
Well, there's the sort of city that ye want
By the Red Sea.

EUELPIDES. Not by the sea! Not where
The Salaminian, with a process-server⁷
On board, may heave in sight some early morn.
But can't you mention some Hellenic town?

HOOPOE. Why don't ye go and settle down in Elis,
At Lepreus?

EUELPIDES. Leprous! I was never there,
But for Melanthius' sake I loathe the name.⁸

HOOPOE. Well then, the Opuntians up in Locris, there's
The place to dwell in!

EUELPIDES. I become Opuntius!
No thank you, no, not for a talent of gold.
But this, this bird-life here, you know it well,
What is this like?

HOOPOE. A pleasant life enough.
Foremost and first you don't require a purse.

EUELPIDES. There goes a grand corrupter of our life!

HOOPOE. Then in the gardens we enjoy the myrtles,
The cress, the poppy, the white sesame.

EUELPIDES. Why, then, ye live a bridegroom's jolly life.

PEISTHETAERUS. Oh! Oh!

O the grand scheme I see in the birds' reach,
And power to grasp it, if ye'd trust to me!

HOOPOE. Trust you in what?

PEISTHETAERUS. What? First don't fly about
In all directions, with your mouths wide open.
That makes you quite despised. With *us*, for instance,
If you should ask the flighty people there,
Who is that fellow? Teleas would reply,
The man's a bird, a flighty feckless bird,
Inconsequential, always on the move.

HOOPOE. Well blamed, i' faith; but what we ought to do,
Tell us.

PEISTHETAERUS. Live all together: found one State.

HOOPOE. What sort of State are birds to found, I wonder.

PEISTHETAERUS. Aye, say you so? You who have made the
most
Idiotic speech, look down.

HOOPOE. I do.

PEISTHETAERUS. Look up.

HOOPOE. I do.

PEISTHETAERUS. Twirl round your head.

HOOPOE. Zeus! I shall be
A marvellous gainer, if I twist my neck!

PEISTHETAERUS. What did you see?

HOOPOE. I saw the clouds and sky.

PEISTHETAERUS. And is not that the Station of the Birds?

HOOPOE. Station?

PEISTHETAERUS. As one should say, their habitation.
Here while the heavens revolve, and yon great dome
Is moving round, ye keep your Station still.
Make this your city, fence it round with walls,
And from your Station is evolved your State.
So ye'll be lords of men, as now of locusts,
And Melian famine shall destroy the Gods.

HOOPOE. Ehl how?

PEISTHETAERUS. The Air's betwixt the Earth and Sky.
And just as we, if we would go to Pytho,
Must crave a grant of passage from Boeotia,
Even so, when men slay victims to the Gods,
Unless the Gods pay tribute, ye in turn
Will grant no passage for the savoury steam
To rise through Chaos, and a realm not theirs.

HOOPOE. Hurrah!

O Earth! ods traps, and nets, and gins, and snares,
This is the nattiest scheme that e'er I heard of!
So with your aid I'm quite resolved to found
The city, if the other birds concur.

PEISTHETAERUS. And who shall tell them of our plan?

HOOPOE. Yourself.

O they're not mere barbarians, as they were
Before I came. I've taught them language now.

PEISTHETAERUS. But how to call them hither?

HOOPOE. That's soon done.

I've but to step within the coppice here,
And wake my sleeping nightingale, and then
We'll call them, both together. Bless the birds,
When once they hear our voices, they'll come running.

PEISTHETAERUS. You darling bird, now don't delay one instant.
O I beseech you get at once within
Your little copse, and wake the nightingale!

The HOOPOE's Serenade

HOOPOE. Awake, my mate!
Shake off thy slumbers, and clear and strong
Let loose the floods of thy glorious song,
The sacred dirge of thy mouth divine
For sore-wept Itys, thy child and mine;
Thy tender trillings his name prolong
With the liquid note of thy tawny throat;
Through the leafy curls of the woodbine sweet
The pure sound mounts to the heavenly seat,
And Phoebus, lord of the golden hair,
As he lists to thy wild plaint echoing there,
Draws answering strains from his ivoried lyre,
Till he stirs the dance of the heavenly choir,
And calls from the blessed lips on high
Of immortal Gods, a divine reply
To the tones of thy witching melody.

(The sound of a flute is heard within, imitating the nightingale's song.)

EUELPIDES. O Zeus and King, the little birdie's voice!
O how its sweetness honied all the copse!

PEISTHETAERUS. Hi!

EUELPIDES. Well?

PEISTHETAERUS. Keep quiet.

EUELPIDES. Why?

PEISTHETAERUS. The Hoopoe here
Is going to favour us with another song.

*The Bird-call by the HOOPOE and Nightingale conjointly;
the Nightingale's song being imitated, as before, by the
flute.*

HOOPOE. Whoop-ho! Whoop-ho! Whoop-hoop-hoop-hoop-
hoop-ho!
Hoi! Hoi! Hoi! Come, come, come, come, come!