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Tyranny in Aristophanes's *Birds*

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Abstract: The protagonist of Aristophanes's *Birds* rises from nowhere to become a *tyrannos* of the first order, but scholars disagree when assessing him. Do Peisetairos's impressive political gifts make him an apt example of competent rule, or does his treatment of his subjects mark him as guilty of hubris and perfidy? While documenting the distinguishing features of this remarkable ruler, it is argued that—Arrowsmith's eloquent essay notwithstanding—Aristophanes does not condemn him. Nor, however, does he recommend Peisetairos's rule, as Henderson suggests. Between these extremes is a more complex *via media*: if a birdlike populace is to have an empire, they must also embrace a Peisetairos. But it would not be unwise to oppose an empire at such a price, even if the Alcibidean leader who would preside over it cannot be condemned for seeking to rule in the way he imagines to be most advantageous for himself.

Introduction

The *Birds*' lead character is outrageous: he abandons his homeland, enlists allies, leads them in an attack on Zeus and the Olympian gods, becomes *tyrannos* over these same allies, does not shrink from grilling and basting some of them on his barbeque, and overthrows Zeus while securing for himself his right-hand girl, the beautiful Basileia, among whose gifts is the stash of Zeus's powers, including his feared thunderbolt.[1] But as outrageous as this Peisetairos is, Aristophanes is even more outrageous: the poet could have made Peisetairos into a grim or ridiculous reminder to other would-be tyrants, a defeated threat to Athenian democracy, piety, and virtue as demonstrated at Marathon. Instead, Aristophanes ends the play with this shocking

Erik Dempsey, John Gibert, Amy Nendza, and the anonymous reviewers of the *Review of Politics* have helped me improve this paper a great deal; its remaining weaknesses are of course my responsibility.

[1]*Tyrannos* does not always imply the opprobrium conveyed by our use of "tyrant" and by Aristotle's sharp distinction between kingships and tyrannies (*Politics* 1279a32–b10), but the ominous connotations of the word are certainly present in the *Birds*. See especially 1071–75 and Keith Sidwell, *Aristophanes the Democrat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 239n61.

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character on center stage as a complete success: the last line of the play even marks his apotheosis as "the highest of the divinities."[2] The same author who ended an earlier play by burning down the school of a teacher whose radical thoughts wreaked havoc with but a single Athenian father, now allows the hero of the *Birds* not only to criticize Zeus but to defy and even unseat him. An explanation is in order.

Of course, one response is to deny that such an explanation is really required. It is a wild and crazy comedy, after all, and the Athenians' long war with Sparta surely made some of them eager for diversions. Indeed, the play is not merely a comedy, like the overtly political *Knights*, for example; it is a fantasy whose events are as impossible as those of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Was Aristophanes not more concerned to divert his viewers than to offer a thoughtful assessment of a new prince like Peisetairos?[3] The whole of what follows constitutes an answer to the preceding question: I find the issues addressed by the play to be deadly serious, and there is no reason to assume that humor, even fantastic humor, must preclude thought rather than stimulate it. But I shall also include a narrower argument against the "mere fantasy" reading and show that Peisetairos becomes a tyrant by cunning, not by magic.

Jeffrey Henderson is one of the many who do take the politics of the play seriously, and his thoughtful line of argument is to deny that Peisetairos is really as shocking as my sketch has just suggested; he even concludes that he is a beneficent master, one who shows the poet's path to "political unity, and a better polis, under leadership of 'the best.'"[4] If Athens had suffered badly under the leadership of such crude demagogues as Cleon, perhaps Aristophanes depicts Peisetairos favorably in order to guide the Athenians toward more competent rule and, hence, toward their salvation. Although I shall offer new evidence of Peisetairos's extraordinary competence, it is in advancing his own interest that he excels, not that of his subjects. Indeed,

[2]Translations are my own. Except where noted otherwise, I rely on the edition by Nan Dunbar, *Aristophanes: Birds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[3]G. Murray, *Aristophanes: A Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 135–63; C. Whitman, *Aristophanes and His Comic Hero* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 167–69; K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 145; Douglas MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 221, 227.

[4]Jeffrey Henderson, "Mass versus Elite and the Comic Heroism of Peisetairos," in *The City as Comedy*, ed. Gregory Dobrov (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 141–42, 145. Henderson's penultimate sentence finds that Aristophanes was wrong to point the way toward "a return to elite rule in Athens," but pointing he was. Henderson is certainly correct to stress that Peisetairos possesses impressive political gifts, as Alcibiades also did. The challenge is to determine for whose benefit they are employed or at what price they come. I hope to resolve this question below.

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he eats his most succulent subjects, so I will be forced below to part company with Henderson (or his Aristophanes): competence directed in part against one's subjects is a dangerously incomplete recommendation.

A far more common and tempting approach offers a moral reading of the play. It marshals the evidence showing that Peisetairos has manipulated everything to serve his own aggrandizement, and it joins Iris as well as others outside the pages of the play in condemning him for hubris in the extreme (1259). When the *Birds* is read like this, one can use it to criticize on moral grounds the Sicilian expedition; its chief proponent and Athenian traitor par excellence, Alcibiades; those who mutilated the Herms and thus offended pious Athenians; the sophists known for their dismissive views of conventional justice; and—more generally, as one of the *Birds*' most eloquent commentators has done—the whole imperial policy of Athens, with its many unsettling innovations, not least the abandonment of the countryside and its farms (along with their local gods), and their taking to their triremes to spread imperial oppression far and wide.[5] Indeed, read in this way, one may even see in the *Birds* a critique of "the coercive and Faustian culture of the West," which the eloquent Arrowsmith finds to have been born in Athens's imperialism.[6] Precisely because it may be that some such critique is in order and even that this Faustian drive toward empire may be "the permanent problem of our own lives and culture," as Arrowsmith says, it is worth wondering how the clever and possibly wise author of the *Birds* assesses Peisetairos and the restless ambition and impiety he seems to represent. Although I am strongly drawn to this reading, in the final analysis the evidence of the play does not support it. In contrast to the story of Faust, the *Birds* ends with Peisetairos in triumph. It can do so only if in Aristophanes's not entirely funny comedy there is no moral order quite as clear and authoritative as the one assumed by Arrowsmith and present in the Christian background of the story of Faust.[7]

[5]Süvern is the acknowledged leader of those who read the *Birds* as an allegory and see it as a critique of the Sicilian expedition (J. W. Süvern, *Essay on "The Birds" of Aristophanes*, trans. W. R. Hamilton [London: John Murray, 1835]). For a more contemporary reading of the *Birds* as a political allegory, see Michael Vickers, "Alcibiades at Sparta: Aristophanes' *Birds*," *Classical Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1995): 339–54. For Alcibiades, see Henderson, "Mass versus Elite," 139; for the mutilation of the Herms, see Thomas Hubbard, "Utopianism and the Sophistic City in Aristophanes," in *The City as Comedy*, ed. Gregory Dobrov, 27. Hubbard is also among those who see the *Birds* as including a critique of the sophists or of "sophistic utopianism" ("Utopianism," 25, 28–29). Peisetairos's manipulative speech leads to an early version of *Animal Farm*, as Hubbard sees it, and Aristophanes was eager to point out the dangers.

[6]W. A. Arrowsmith, "Aristophanes' *Birds*: The Fantasy Politics of Eros," *Arion*, n.s., 1, no. 1 (1973): 146.

[7]See also note 42 below and Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 160–94. Strauss's commentary is rarely cited, in

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To document his tyranny and to help show that the *Birds* is not a mere fantasy, I begin by examining the means by which Peisetairos is able to succeed in his unlikely undertaking. Doing so also provides new evidence to support an emphasis on Peisetairos's political savvy. But showing a leader to be savvy, as our use of "Machiavellian" makes clear, is not always a recommendation, at least not to his subjects. Hence, after considering how adroitly he executes his revolution, a consideration sharpened by contrasting Peisetairos with another of Aristophanes's radicals, his Socrates, I discuss its consequences for the birds in particular.[8] My conclusion is that although Aristophanes does not recommend a leader who is clever but apt to exploit his subjects, neither does he blame one who seizes the opportunities that foolish subjects offer up to him. Peisetairos's political gifts do not make him a good leader for the demos, but the demos's weaknesses are no reason for Peisetairos not to be a good leader for himself. I thus arrive at a *via media* between the view that heaps moral blame on Peisetairos and the view that sees his political ability as an unqualified recommendation. My last words observe that his companion Euelpides has abandoned Peisetairos's political project: this suggests that his view of the best life substitutes in some measure for the moral critique that never materializes in the *Birds*. These views not only represent challenges to both Athenian and modern democratic sympathies, they also reinforce the obvious but still useful warning that rulers often prey upon their subjects while professing to serve them.

I. The New Prince: How Does Peisetairos, a Nobody, Become a Tyrant?

The conditions of Peisetairos's success are many. They include his decision to abandon his native land, his change in immediate plan from one for private pleasure to one for empire, his enlistment of Tereus (a bird who once was a man) to join him and become his mediator with the birds,[9] his persuasion

part because it is so elusive. It has nonetheless influenced my own reading, especially but not only with regard to the important differences between Euelpides and Peisetairos.

[8]All my references to Socrates concern Aristophanes's presentation of him. Determining how this Socrates relates to the historical Socrates or the one made "young and beautiful" by Plato is beyond the scope of this article.

[9]Tereus was a subject of myth and the title character of one of Sophocles's lost tragedies. For the most thorough treatment of this play, which was produced before the *Birds*, see David Fitzpatrick, "Sophocles' Tereus," *Classical Quarterly*, n.s., 51, no. 1 (2001): 90–101. See also Gregory Dobrov, "The Tragic and the Comic Tereus," *American Journal of Philology* 114, no. 2 (1993): 189–234.

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of the birds to act against the gods, his founding of the city (building walls, choosing a name and patron god, conducting sacrifices), his exclusion from his fledgling city of unworthy or dangerous visitors and would-be immigrants, his defense of the new city by driving out the invading goddess Iris, his use of and improvement on the counsel of the divine traitor Prometheus, his division and conquest of the three divine plenipotentiaries (Poseidon, Heracles, and the Triballian), and his celebration of a public marriage to Basileia, thus cementing his authority and making known his power (1744–54).

Looking more closely at these conditions for success shows the realism underlying Peisetairos's rapid route to tyranny. In particular, the actual mechanics of Peisetairos's revolution prove the *Birds* to be less a fantasy than it first appears. From the subjects listed in the preceding paragraph, I shall stress Peisetairos's defense of his plan to Tereus, Tereus's service as mediator with the birds, and Peisetairos's wild success in his Great Speech to the birds.

First Steps: Peisetairos's Enlistment of Tereus

Peisetairos and his colleague Euelpides seek to escape the busy and litigious life lived by the Athenians and learn from the well-traveled Tereus where they might find a city that would satisfy their desires for personal pleasure (39–48). While so doing, he appears to stumble upon a bold plan not to seek an existing city but to establish a new city of birds in the clouds, to fortify it, and to use it "to rule over human beings as over grasshoppers and to destroy the gods through a Melian famine" (185–86). Tereus, however, shows a prudent reserve before concluding that Peisetairos's wildly ambitious plan has merit. Before he is finally persuaded, he asks five questions, both to clarify what the plan is and to see whether it is really possible. Even though Peisetairos here describes his plan in radical terms—nowhere else does he speak of destroying the gods or ruling men like grasshoppers[10]—Tereus questions whether the plan is possible, not whether it is pious or just, although this does not stop him from later promoting the plan as just to the birds (316). Indeed, when Tereus is finally persuaded that the plan is possible, he utters an excited oath that underscores the amoral character of his enthusiasm: "by earth, by traps, by snares, by nets!" (194). If one must promise justice to some audiences, Peisetairos has here excited Tereus—who in fable had raped a relative, cut out her tongue, and been made a bird as a punishment of Zeus—by stressing the very boldness of a plan to destroy the Olympians. Perhaps his references here to traps, snares, and nets suggest he has also seen that the birds themselves will be targets of the hunt.

[10]Peisetairos never again speaks of destroying the gods, but Prometheus later credits him with having destroyed Zeus (1514).

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Peisetairos uses an analogy to confirm that his plan is not hot air. Just as Athenians must pay a toll to pass through Boeotia if they are going to reach the Pythian priestess at Delphi, so the gods will have to pay a tribute to the birds if they wish the savory aromas sent up by human beings to be allowed to pass through the birds' newly fortified territory, the air (185–93). The analogy treats gods as being at least as needy as men: the gods are in need of sacrifices offered up by men, just as the Athenians thought they were in need of oracles sent down by gods. The gods will be subject to the gate-keeping birds just as Athenians are subject to the gate-keeping Boeotians. The analogy also suggests, I think, that the gods will both suffer more than the blockaded Athenians and that they are less able to fight effectively against the blockade.[11] For if this blockade can really effect the destruction of the gods, it is impiously implied that the gods have nothing of sufficient value to offer the birds in return for the sacrificial aromas they need, that they are unable to defeat the blockading birds by force or cunning, and that the blockade puts their very being at stake. Peisetairos's parallel to what appears to have been an annoyance for the Athenians becomes a catastrophe for the gods. Apart from suggesting that control of intermediate territory can be useful for interrupting and profiting from transit, Peisetairos's example suggests that the gods need sustenance from men much more than men—or at least Athenians—need oracles from gods. Bluntly put, the core of Peisetairos's impiety is the view that the gods need human beings as much or more than human beings need gods. Although this notion may at first appear merely fantastic, I argue below that the fantasy becomes realism, if only one understands the claim correctly.

Securing a Hearing: Tereus's Adroit Mediation with the Birds

Aspiring tyrants need help, and Tereus proves a clever speaker and thus a useful mediator between Peisetairos and the birds. Three points suggest that Tereus is clever even in the way he summons the birds. One is that he does not reveal to the birds that he is calling them together to consider a plan for empire over the gods, a plan so bold it would engender resistance if openly announced. Instead, he tells a flattering lie, announcing that the visitors come as great lovers of the way of life of the birds, not as revolutionaries who wish to transform it (324, 412–15). Second, Tereus is careful not to say initially that he is calling the birds to enter into the presence of human beings, who are natural predators of birds. Rather, with the aid of his wife's alluring song voice, he calls for them to enter a discussion because a keen *presbus* has arrived. Now in the

[11]The Athenians were able to fight back against the Lacedaemonians when blockaded from Delphi in the so-called Second Sacred War of 449–48. Since it was not religious reasons that led them to fight, the Athenians were even less dependent on the gods than Peisetairos implies (cf. 556; Thucydides 1.112; Plutarch, *Pericles* 21).

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texts that survive from Greek antiquity, which naturally feature the speech of human beings, a *presbus* is almost always an old man, but a *presbus* may also be an old horse or other animal: it does not by itself announce that the visitors are of the feared and hated human race. Indeed, a *presbus* can even be a bird, a "wren."[12] Tereus is careful not to give the birds either reasons not to come or time to plan opposition. Only after the birds have arrived and can see for themselves do we hear that on hand are two men rather than one *presbus* (317). Third, Tereus calls the birds species by species, but his long catalog does not include any birds of prey.[13] Tereus wishes to limit the birds' capacity to fight as well as their suspicion that they might need to fight, so he calls songbirds and grain eaters. The largest carnivores he calls eat gnats or minnows (245, 251). It is of course fantastic on one level to imagine birds assembling to listen to a political speech by a human being, but the techniques here employed to assemble them and to win a hearing have a wider application.

When the birds arrive, they are deeply angered to find that Tereus has called them into the presence of human beings. They complain that he has betrayed them and violated ancient laws and oaths (*thesmoi* and *horkoi*, 328–32), and it appears that our heroes may be attacked. The men's military preparations and willingness to use them help ward off this attack, for speech alone cannot do everything. Once military preparedness gives negotiations a chance, Tereus tries to avert the birds' anger with this memorable imperative: "Do not fear reason [or speech, *logos*]" (323). Surely it is better to talk a matter through than to race to armed conflict! And yet the sequel suggests that the appeal to reason over traditional law is charged with enormous dangers, at least for those who do not reason well. So many are the defects of all established orders, it seems, and so powerful are the hopes for improving upon them (or evading them), that—if it can get a hearing—the appeal to speech over traditional law is well positioned to win support it often does not deserve.[14]

[12]LSJ, 9th ed., s.v. "*presbus*" (sense IV).

[13]*Birds* 230–53. Although uncalled, one or two types of hawk do turn up among the many species of birds that arrive (303–4; 271–350). Later, at 359, Euelpides refers to birds with "crooked claws." It appears a few tough birds may have responded to the summons even though they were not specifically invited. Later in the play, Peisetairos also shows sensitivity to important differences among bird species, for he calls fighting birds when they are needed (1246–51, 1178–81), and he objects when the priest invites ravenous birds to the sacrifices, for they quickly devour much of the sacrificial offering (889–92).

[14]This theme is massively present elsewhere in Aristophanes's corpus, especially in his treatment of the Unjust Speech in the *Clouds* (whose victory is made easier by the laughable weaknesses of the rival speech). Consider as well Aristophanes's critiques of Socrates and Euripides as seducers away from civic traditions. Edoardo de Carli is one of the many scholars who closely follows Aristophanes's treatment of the power of rhetoric (De Carli, *Aristophane e la sofistica* [Florence: Nuova Italia Editrice, 1971], esp. 26–40).

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Once he has gained a hearing, Tereus's most effective argument for allowing Peisetairos to speak is that the wise learn from their enemies and not only from their friends (375). This argument enables him to avoid persisting in his unpersuasive claim that the birds' natural enemies, human beings, are really their friends. There have been far too many chicken dinners for the birds to buy this! But just what is it that the wise learn from their enemies? Tereus explains that they learn to keep their enemies far away (375–82). By stressing the maxim but comically forgetting the cautions implied in the example he uses to justify it, he leads the birds not to keep their enemies distant but to invite them into their midst. It further helps his cause that his audience is susceptible to the seductive hope of great gains, of "having it all" (422–26).

Although the birds' revolution against the gods is fantastic in important respects, hard-headed politics and clever speech occupy its core. To see further the instructive steps underlying Peisetairos's rise to power, we turn from Tereus to Peisetairos himself.

Snaring the Birds: Peisetairos's Great Speech

Peisetairos's speech to the birds is divisible into three parts, with each part being marked and followed by a response by the birds (539–49, 571–72, 627–38).[15] The two longer responses are wildly enthusiastic; the central one doubts for a moment that human beings will come to believe that birds are gods. In the first response the birds declare that their lives will not be worth living if they do not recover the kingship Peisetairos has just told them was once theirs (548–49). They even proclaim Peisetairos their savior, and offer up to him their chicks and themselves.[16] In their final response, they again refer to the recovery of their lost political authority (636), and they again ask Peisetairos to direct them, though this time they also specify that Peisetairos should reserve for himself all works that require brains: they will provide the brawn (637–38).[17] In short, Peisetairos wins the birds over completely: not only do they agree to his plan, they also insist that he

[15]Focusing on the meter leads to a different division of this *agon* of the play and highlights the traditional elements of the parabasis. See Dunbar, *Birds*, 309. I offer my simpler division in an attempt to highlight the effect of the speech on the birds and to locate the sources of this effect. I here follow the line attributions in the older version of the Oxford text, *Aristophanis Comoediae*, ed. F. W. Hall and W. M. Geldart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900).

[16]Although they sometimes do occur without religious connotations, *anatithēmi* ("offer up") and *sōtēr* ("savior") often carry overtones of religious dedication. The former was used of votive gifts to a god, and the latter was an epithet of gods and heroes, especially Zeus.

[17]Oddly, they do not ask to be assigned works that require courage, yet this is the virtue the lack of which caused their fathers to lose their kingship, at least as they surmise (*kakē*, 541). Perhaps the birds sense they too lack it, but how can they expect

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lead them in executing it. Surely Henderson is correct in seeing Peisetairos as a gifted leader, but to what extent will his leadership serve those whom he leads?

Two points deserve emphasis. The first is that Peisetairos leaves the birds with absurdly high hopes or expectations. They expect to overthrow the gods and recover the kingship they now believe was once theirs, and—however happy they thought they were before their sudden infatuation—they now claim they will be miserable unless they succeed. Judged by the standards represented by their current state of mind, Peisetairos's revolution will fail them, for it will be he who acquires this kingship, not they. Second, the birds lose their prior caution when confronting a creature they held to be "naturally deceitful" (451–52) and, indeed, they become adamant that their erstwhile enemy should accept the full management of their affairs (544–49, 637–38). Although Peisetairos professes that his guiding purpose is to restore the birds' ancestral kingship, the birds' responses show the progress he is making toward becoming the king and even the god of those who naively hope to become kings and gods.

Peisetairos had also made Tereus excited about his plan, but the way he then described the plan, the way he defended it, and Tereus's response were all different.[18] Tereus responded with an immoral oath and an offer to help recruit the birds; he did not surrender all authority to Peisetairos or offer him service without limit. To Tereus, Peisetairos had never indicated that the planned destruction of the gods and rule over men would be just; its promises of power (164) and honor (166) were its main lure. When speaking to the birds, Peisetairos never mentions ruling over men, and he supplies a rationale showing how his plan would reverse an ancient injustice.[19] The

to triumph without it? For another possible surmise about why their fathers were defeated, see Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 167.

[18]Dunbar notes that Peisetairos is "strikingly inconsistent" in the way he characterizes the "ethical status" of his project (*Birds*, 8). If inconsistent with each other, however, his statements are tailored to the audiences to which they are addressed. He uses a moral argument with the birds, who adopt it as their own; the promise of power and the destruction of the gods to Tereus, who is excited by the plan's bold deviousness; intimidation with Iris, who could never be persuaded the birds really have a right to rule; and euphemistic suggestions that his reforms will help the gods to Heracles, who is dumb enough to be seduced by them, at least when a bribe of birds' meat sweetens the deal.

[19]Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 167. Peisetairos never quite calls the revolution just; and his conclusion that it is "right" (*orthōs*, 478; cf. *orthēn*, 1) may be weakened by being put in the form of a question, resting on comic hypotheses, not an affirmation. At 631–35, the birds express their readiness to join Peisetairos on the condition that the cause is a just and pious one. The birds appear to care that their revolution should be a just one, but whether for intellectual or moral reasons, they allow themselves to be persuaded easily that it is.

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same rationale flatters the birds and stimulates their hope for a brilliant future. His fuller elaboration conjures up discontent with a humiliating present situation and sneers at the incompetence of their rivals, the gods, thus making the fruits of victory seem close at hand.

To help the birds believe their revolution would be justified and successful, he tells them a tall tale, claiming that they ruled in the beginning of time, so the current rulers, the gods, are usurpers. If kingship rightly belongs to the first kings, the birds are justified in demanding the return of the scepter they once wielded (477–80). Our hero does not make a hardheaded case for rule, one like the Athenians used privately among the Melians;[20] he rather uses the birds' concern with justice as one of the snares by which he makes them his.[21] As radical as his plan is, Peisetairos does not bluntly dismiss reigning views of either the gods or justice: he uses (or abuses) prevailing notions so as to render the overthrow of the Olympians appear both just and pious. As with justice, so with the gods, he does not simply say, "Seize your opportunity! Forget justice: it comes at too high a price. And forget the gods: they don't exist." Rather, he says, "Justice favors you, and you are the rightful gods." Surely this also makes it easier for the birds to think they will succeed.

The birds could believe they have a just claim to rule without being willing to act vigorously to exercise it, as would even be wise if avoiding rule would be better for them than seeking it. Peisetairos's decisive speech to the birds is thus not content to offer them a claim to rule; it also enflames them so that they will insist on getting their due, even without first considering whether Zeus rules poorly or whether they would rule either happily or well (539–49). To enflame the birds Peisetairos offers a wonderful description of how the birds have lost honor in the eyes of human beings.

Long ago, people believed that birds were great and holy, he claims, but now birds are thought of as slavish simpletons: not only are they hunted and eaten, but undecided buyers pick them over in the markets, and cooks season them heavily, as though their flesh were rotten (522–38). This vivid description of the insults they currently suffer so affects the birds that the happy apolitical life they apparently enjoyed moments before is no longer deemed worth living if they are not to become kings again (155–61; cf. 1088–1100).[22] Stung by the imagined humiliation of having lost their royal status, the birds are ready for action even before considering whether they have a chance of success. Honor is the spark that moves them to claim what is rightfully theirs (542).

[20]Thucydides 5.89, 105.

[21]His later references to justice at 1222 (to Iris) and at 1598–99 (to the three gods) are so laughably self-serving as to show more clearly than no reference at all that he is not guided by it.

[22]This is not the very first time that reputation in the eyes of men proves important to a bird (or man-bird): cf. 164–71.

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By inflating the birds' hopes, Peisetairos increases the birds' dependence on him for the fulfillment of these hopes; at the same time, these inflamed hopes also make their happiness that much more vulnerable to disappointment. In seeking to escape the dishonor of being thought simpletons (522, 165–70) and in hoping for a glorious return to ruling, they—like simpletons—increase their vulnerability to exploitation by a natural enemy.

Their new goal of ruling over all, without which they now think life is not worth living, stands in sharp contrast to the defensive reasons Tereus had given them in favor of listening to Peisetairos in the first place: from your enemies you wise birds can learn to protect your children, house, and possessions, he said (380). Now they will hazard their children and themselves in order to try to become kings. To strengthen his hold on the birds, Peisetairos relies on their sense of having been wronged and their desire for honor, more than the promise of gain, to motivate them to run the risk of defying the gods.[23]

Peisetairos's plan as presented to the birds differs from his statements to Tereus not only in that he calls for the birds to become gods but also in the means he outlines to bring down the Olympians. When speaking to Tereus, Peisetairos had proposed destroying the gods by cutting off sacrificial vapors by means of a wall; he now implies that the same result can be obtained by a less fantastical course of action, namely, by having human beings redirect or cease their sacrifices. Ending sacrifices is as lethal as blocking sacrificial vapors. Since sacrifices are controlled by custom and belief (whereas smoke is not), the fate of the gods comes to turn on custom and belief (518–38): disbelief destroys them. This reading also takes advantage of the second meaning of "Melian" at 186; for, thanks to a certain Diagoras of Melos, it can suggest "atheist" as well as refer to Athens's brutal treatment of the islanders of Melos.[24] And perhaps it is no coincidence that this way of destroying the Olympians is no fantasy: it worked even outside the pages of comedy. In the *Birds*, it begins to appear, they are gods whom human beings believe to be gods.

The sequel confirms that the birds are not able to defeat the gods through military or technical means, such as the building of a wall. Note, for example, that Iris flies through the birds' new Babylon-like fortifications without even noticing them, even though they are also supposed to be defended by guard birds. Prometheus and the three divine ambassadors also enter Cloudcuckooland without difficulty. Nor, apparently, is it the new city's

[23]As Tereus had also done, Peisetairos hints that rule also brings tangible benefits (513, 517–19), but the birds seem generally less needy of these than the gods are. The gods' need for men to supply their nourishment is the core of the play, and their hunger for sex with mortal women is also indicated (cf. 610–26).

[24]Cf. 1073; *Clouds* 830; F. E. Romer, "Atheism, Impiety and the *Limos Mēlios* in Aristophanes' *Birds*," *American Journal of Philology* 115, no. 3 (1994): 352–58; and Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 318n49.

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leaky fortifications that prove decisive in depriving the gods of their sustenance: rather, as we learn from both Iris and Prometheus, the gods' problem is that human beings cease sacrificing to them altogether (1230–37, 1515–20). Peisetairos also emphasizes the importance of this cessation (1236–37). When we look at Peisetairos's words, we see an emphasis on human beings, what customs they follow and what beliefs they hold. And when we look at the revolution in deed, we see that the defeat of the gods comes not from a bird-built wall but because human beings have ceased to offer up sacrifices to the Olympians. More fruitful than fighting gods is fighting human opinions about gods.

The birds, then, begin to take their bearings by the opinions of the very beings to whom they had had a natural enmity and over whom they were to rule once again (369–71; see 185, 481–84, 499, 504). This is in accord with the insight at the basis of Peisetairos's impiety and that makes possible his tyranny: he has concluded that men make gods, certainly not vice versa. Persuasive speech proves more decisive than celestial wall building.

II. Justice: Is Peisetairos's Tyranny Advantageous for His Subjects?

As noted above, critics of the *Birds* divide on the question of how to assess Peisetairos and, especially, how to assess the moral character of his leadership. Should we criticize him as an ambitious leader always eager to advance his interest at the expense of others? Or should we defend him as a competent leader who uses his superior gifts to improve the lives of others? Might he defend himself even if his rule is not primarily for the sake of his subjects?

Peisetairos's fellow citizens and subjects are especially the birds, though his actions also have implications for human beings and, of course, for the Olympians. Let us consider whether his rule is advantageous for his fellow citizens.

Since it had appeared at an early moment as though the revolution would be for the birds, and that in large measure it would be of and by them as well, let me note the evidence that tracks the tension in the relationship between Peisetairos and the birds. Doing so helps to suggest that Peisetairos's victory is a defeat for the birds.[25]

One obvious point is the confusion that surrounds the question of whose city this new city is going to be and who will be holding Zeus's scepter. Peisetairos initially implies that the city will be of the birds. He invents a myth and adduces evidence to show that the birds deserve to rule, and he appears to give his advice with a view to helping them recover their rule

[25]Henderson is perhaps unique in seeing Peisetairos as a beneficent master and one whose rule over the birds has been legitimated by their consent ("Mass versus Elite," 141–42).

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(e.g., 562). It is the birds, it appears, who will rule and come to be believed to be gods. Accordingly, soon before he disappears from the stage for good, the bird Tereus refers to the city as "our city" (812). Trouble has long been brewing, however, and Peisetairos corrects him promptly by calling it "my city" (815). The leader of the chorus of birds calls it "my city" at 1264 and 1316, and the birds speak of "our kingship" at 549. The uses of these personal pronouns suggest interest in the question of whose city it will be and disagreement over the answer. The question of who will wield Zeus's scepter or exercise his rule is roughly similar: Peisetairos leads the birds to think that the scepter is theirs and that they will be recovering it from the gods (636). Peisetairos's first main bit of advice for the birds is that they demand *their* rule back from Zeus (554). Prometheus advises Peisetairos not to reach an agreement with Zeus unless he gives his scepter over to the birds (1535), and it is for its return to "these [birds]" that Heracles casts his vote (1626), after he has distinguished Peisetairos as a human being and Poseidon has called him a man (*anthrōpos*, 1575; *anēr*, 1581). But of course at the end of the play, the birds end up singing hymns to Peisetairos (and to the thunderbolt with which *he* will shake the earth, 1744–52), and Peisetairos is specifically identified as a man, not as one of the birds (*anēr*, 1728). That the conclusion of the play represents above all a personal triumph is underscored by its focus on Peisetairos's marriage to the beautiful Basileia, who brings with her Zeus's powers and whose name means "kingship."[26]

It is true that well before they celebrate Peisetairos's triumph, the birds sing a couple of happy songs about themselves in the two odes of the second parabasis (1058–71, 1088–1101). Nevertheless, the happiness they celebrate is that of their natural lives, the lives they lived for ages before being tempted to pursue an imperial course of action. Although they admit to looking forward to the prospect of having mortals offer up sacrifices to them (1059–60), it is their ease and joy in all seasons that leads them to call themselves "happy" (1088–1100). No mention is made in this song of having become kings or enjoying a political life. And when in an earlier song they do make a bold but brief claim about their universal rule, they explain and support this claim by reference to rule over insects and similar pests, not over human beings or gods. In keeping with this, when they break the dramatic illusion and threaten the judges of the play, they refer only to their natural (excretory!) powers, not to divine ones (1114–17). Nor do they call themselves divine at this point.[27]

But the situation of the birds at the end of the play is captured not merely by the fact that they are left to applaud the triumphant rise of Peisetairos, not

[26]We saw earlier that Peisetairos had made great progress toward becoming supreme even during his Great Speech, so only birds could be surprised that he is called "ruler" (*archōn*) at 1123 and ends up on top.

[27]Contrast *Clouds* 1121, where the Clouds do assert their divinity.

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their own, but also by the scene in which the great leader of the birds is preparing a feast of birds' meat (1583–85)! This is especially amusing to nonavian audiences, for Peisetairos is cooking the birds with a variety of seasonings, while it was he himself who had previously and ingeniously riled up the birds by pointing out how degrading it was that men not only ate birds but implicitly insulted the quality of their flesh by seasoning it heavily (531–38). The one-time vindicator of the transgressed rights of birds is now shown committing the injuries and implying the insults he formerly decried. If the birds had memories, they would recall that this is not what they fought for.

Of course we do have it on Peisetairos's report that he is cooking only birds who were duly convicted of the injustice of having revolted against the democratic birds; but even if one takes Peisetairos at his word, as I would not, he does not go so far as to add that the democratic birds specified that the guilty birds were to be cooked, seasoned, and eaten by one bird in particular. Beyond this, I look in vain for signs that Peisetairos—soon to be declared a *tyrannos* (1708)—is a committed defender of democratic principles properly understood; if the birds really acted as a jury under the forms of law, could it have been because the great leader managed to cook up popular support for the roasting of some enemies of the people?[28] It may add further spice to the picture that Peisetairos appears to have bird-slaves who help him get the seasonings and culinary implements he needs to perfect the feast—at least he is free with the use of the imperative mood as he calls for them.

Henderson and Dunbar insist that this passage is merely a joke teasing the Athenians for their exaggerated fears of possible threats to their democracy.[29] This case would be stronger, I think, if this episode were an isolated incident and were truly "of no importance to the plot of the play," as Henderson claims.[30] But if Peisetairos is consistent in manipulating and exploiting the birds, particular instances of such should be noted as being part of a pattern. Consider, then, that Peisetairos seeks to enlist the support of Heracles by offering him a share in bird milk, a feast on birds' meat, and a position as a *tyrannos* (1672–73). Peisetairos does not consult the birds over his generous offer to Heracles, whose voracious appetite was legendary and would not be sated by, say, a mere side order of sparrows; indeed, he does not consult them on any decision he makes in the entire play, not even when volunteering that they would offer a good fraction of their own long lives in order to win favor from human beings and be believed to be gods by them (606–9). Of course, one might counter that Peisetairos has no intention of following through on his promise to make Heracles a *tyrannos*, so

[28]Strauss adds deliciously that the enemies of democracy are likely to be aristocratic birds, who would surely be plump and juicy (*Socrates and Aristophanes*, 187).

[29]Henderson, "Mass versus Elite," 141–42; Dunbar, *Birds*, 720.

[30]Jeffrey Henderson, *Aristophanes' "The Birds"* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Classical Library, 1999), 14.

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the birds would not really be betrayed to him. This is absolutely true: once he wins the beautiful consort who keeps Zeus's powers, Peisetairos will hardly hand any fraction of the tyranny (or of the birds' meat) over to an irresponsible and gluttonous Olympian, but neither will he share his power with the birds. It is for the sake of his own rule that the birds are manipulated and betrayed, not that of Heracles. But that they are manipulated and betrayed is beyond doubt; only a birdbrain could miss it.

One might think that if Peisetairos has become a bird himself, his rule over the birds is not likely to be marked by such a harsh conflict of interests: he would no longer be a natural enemy of birds as such. It is true enough that Peisetairos does grow feathers (801–8; cf. 649–55), and his costume from 801 on would probably have had him looking more or less birdlike to the audience; he also speaks as a bird (1616–25). Although I do not see that he is ever called a bird or particular species of bird, I do not doubt that if the play were longer, the birds might eventually get around to calling him a bird and one of their own. On the other hand, it is striking that he is called a human being and a man even near the end of the play (1575, 1581, 1728), he marries not a bird but a presumably anthropomorphic goddess, he cooks and eats like a man, and he looks as ridiculous as he does birdlike in feathers (801–8). Most importantly, he continues to act and speak like a deceitful human being, not like a silly bird, which is key for how the birds themselves understand the difference between the two species (451–56). I conclude that as one swallow does not make a spring, a few feathers do not make a bird.[31] But even if the birds could with some reason think that Peisetairos was one of their own, the play would merely confirm what we all know to be true, that intraspecies rule is hardly a guarantee that the rule will be directed toward the advantage of the ruled. Even when he was indubitably still a man, Peisetairos had proposed a treasonous plan that would result in birds ruling over his own species as over grasshoppers. If he has become a bird, he is a dangerous one.

Seduced into believing that they were once gods and can be gods again, the birds put themselves and their chicks into the hands of the adroit Peisetairos.

[31]Dunbar, by contrast, denies that the references to Peisetairos as a man are "significant for the plot" (*Birds*, on 1726–30). These references do not settle by themselves the question of the relationship between Peisetairos's interests and those of the birds, but they help to keep this important theme front and center. Surprisingly, the play may suggest it is easier for a man to become a god than to become a bird: the former requires only a change in opinions, while the latter requires a conquest of nature. Romer also finds it significant that Prometheus refers to Peisetairos as a human being ("Atheism, Impiety and the *Limos Mēlios* in Aristophanes' *Birds*," 360). If the birds and Peisetairos must belong to the same species, let us consider them both human: not by a miraculous biological transformation but by the greater power of metaphor, the birds become foolish groups of human beings who, seduced by high but unrealizable hopes, put their lives in jeopardy.

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They do not attain the kingship without which they declared life not to be worth living, some of them have ended up on their leader's barbeque grill and others will, and all of them are left powerless: they have little choice but to sing the praises of the man who is their new *tyrannos* (1708). But to stress that Peisetairos manipulates the birds is not yet to say the play blames him: the birds' folly and naive dreams of divine grandeur deprive them of sympathy.

Although it would be a mistake to limit the resonance of the *Birds* to the Athens of 414, Peisetairos's bold imperialism cannot but remind us of that of Athens as well, and thinking about the play in its original context can help to sharpen its meaning. The expedition so vigorously supported by Alcibiades had sailed the year before the play was performed, he was then convicted of mutilating the Herms and profaning the Eleusinian mysteries, and he responded by defecting to the archenemy of his native land, Sparta.[32] Aristophanes's play about imperialism and impiety was performed in an atmosphere dominated by these very subjects.

With regard to this concrete political situation, my reading suggests the following points: (1) That the demos and leaders such as Alcibiades/Peisetairos do not share a harmony of interests. They are, as it were, of different species. Caution and suspicion are hence entirely justified, though high hopes of cooperation may throw this caution to the winds. (2) That the demos are at an extreme disadvantage, notwithstanding their numbers, for they are easily misled by a rival of such remarkable gifts (and by their own blind hopes). (3) That if—if!—they are to pursue a bold imperial policy, the demos nonetheless need leaders such as Alcibiades/Peisetairos, in spite of the risks that come with them: on their own, they are not up to ruling under such complex circumstances. The *Birds* justifies caution on the part of a birdlike populace when facing gifted rulers, but if they renounce such leaders, they must also renounce the bold enterprises that only such leaders can execute successfully. The Sicilian expedition proved a disaster for the Athenians because they lost to foreign enemies; but even if they had won, would the rule of the demos have been compromised by the demands of imperial rule? The problem for the birds of Cloudcuckooland is their submission and vulnerability to their new *tyrannos*, even without a decisive defeat.[33] From their association with Peisetairos the birds become part of an empire and become gods at least in some respects, but they also lose their freedom and find themselves at the mercy of their great leader. Certainly they do not gain what they thought they would, a position in which they

[32]These and related events are of course memorably described by Thucydides, especially in 6.1–32, 53–61, 74, 88–93, 7.18.

[33]Tereus is never described as a king or tyrant over the birds, and his powers appear to be limited. He does not dine on birds; he is able to call the birds into assembly only with the aid of his wife's alluring voice; only with difficulty does he get the birds to listen to Peisetairos.

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do the ruling; instead, they are vulnerable to being devoured. The party at the end of the play has the birds celebrating Peisetairos and his marriage; at best the birds bask in his glow.

It is often suggested that a certain conservatism pervades Aristophanes's plays. Scholars argue that he opposes demagoguery; paying the poor to serve on juries or in the assembly; war with Sparta; such purveyors of new ideas as the sophists, Socrates, and Euripides; and the urban center as opposed to outlying farms.[34] If deeply held, such judgments would be hard to reconcile with openness to Peisetairos, who is himself something of a sophist, demagogue, and imperialist. Put differently, that the curtain falls with Peisetairos enjoying a spectacular triumph suggests that Aristophanes's purported conservatism is limited and complicated.

By my reading, the *Birds* is thus not a moral critique of Peisetairos, of the sophists, of Athenian imperialism, or of Faustian bargains in general. If it were, Peisetairos would be made to endure a few moments like those undergone by the unhorsed Richard III or by the Socrates of the *Clouds*. Or his rivals or subjects would be shown to be worthy in some important respect. Or at least a powerful voice would make an engaging case that Peisetairos was on the wrong track.[35] It is not hard to imagine grounds on which to criticize a man who assaults the gods and eats his subjects, but Aristophanes did not design his play to express them.

Of course it is true that Peisetairos is outrageous. He acts boldly and cleverly, without regard for justice except as a tool for manipulation or as rules for others to obey.[36] Nevertheless—unless "therefore" is more apt—he winds up with everything by the end of the play. Viewed by themselves,

[34]Sommerstein is a good example, but he is hardly alone: Alan H. Sommerstein, "An Alternative Democracy and an Alternative to Democracy in Aristophanic Comedy," in *Democrazia e antidemocrazia nel mondo greco*, ed. Umberto Bultrighini (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2005), 197–201. It appears that Sommerstein holds these judgments to have been expressed more for their attractiveness to the audience than because Aristophanes himself was wedded to them, which I think represents an important qualification.

[35]Contrast the *Ploutos*, which includes Penia's challenge to Chremylos (415–609); the *Peace*, which has assorted merchants and manufacturers of arms protesting Trygaeus's defeat of Zeus (1208–64; cf. 1075, 1077–79); and, especially, the *Clouds*, in which Strepsiades puts his finger on Socrates's failings (1476–77, 1506–7). In the *Birds*, the comically disgruntled characters do not so much complain about Peisetairos's actions as wish to enjoy the benefits deriving from his innovations. Iris's apparently empty threat is the lone exception to this rule (1238–61).

[36]He is never shown wielding the scepter. The missing scepter, I think, underscores the illegitimacy of his rule: he rules by personal power, not by established law, as represented by the scepter. Dunbar's alternative explanation for the absence of the scepter stresses that the thunderbolt is more dramatic on stage than a mere scepter; she suggests also that the absence of the scepter is less offensive to tradition and leaves the full extent of Peisetairos's revolution in a little doubt (Dunbar, *Birds*, 13–14).

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his lawless actions make it tempting to join Arrowsmith and blame Peisetairos for his hubris and Faustian drive for mastery. But if one cannot refute the Athenian ambassadors to Melos by calling them Faustian and noting that their policies are dangerous to others, neither would Peisetairos be unsettled to learn that his glorious empire comes at the expense of gods and birds. "Why should it not?" he would ask. "After all, the Olympians demand much in return for nothing, and the birds are both fools and natural enemies to human beings. Why should I shrink from being the king of everything for their sake?" How does the play judge such an answer?

Conclusion: Peisetairos as Founder and the Tyrant's Life

The overall drama of the *Birds* seems to vindicate Peisetairos, for it concludes with his enjoying a glorious victory. The birds, Zeus, Basileia, and human devotees of the Olympians all fail to take even the first step toward an effective counterrevolution; no powerful voices are raised against Peisetairos or defend the principles he violates. Indeed, and as we saw, the action of the play even appears to endorse his underlying judgments. Peisetairos is shown to be correct about the vulnerability of Zeus and the gods, for example: they do little to protect their interests and appear to lose their strength as soon as human beings cease to sacrifice to them. Peisetairos's view that the Olympians are weak is vindicated, not ridiculed. Also vindicated is his view that they do little to benefit human beings, for in the *Birds*, apart from Prometheus's treason, the gods do nothing beneficial and show no signs of having any such capacity or inclination.

If it is impossible to use the collapsed authority of the Olympians to mount an argument against Peisetairos, we also saw that it is no easier to adopt the case of the birds: they are so pitifully thoughtless in their own quest to become kings that they cannot represent a firm position from which to criticize the natural enemy they first allowed to enter their midst and soon thereafter made their leader. One can certainly say that the play contains a warning to such birdlike people as are inclined to take risks in order to enjoy thinking of themselves as being more entitled to rule or more divine than they really are, but one must add that groups in need of such warnings would probably be too foolish to heed them. But even if the play should be in part a warning that doves should stay clear of eagles, this is not yet to establish that eagles should not be themselves.

But if the *Birds* concludes by honoring the radical imperialist Peisetairos, why does the *Clouds* punish the radical natural scientist Socrates? By what strange principles would it make more sense for Socrates to be punished than Peisetairos? It is not that Peisetairos is more just or more respectful of traditional Athenian views, I think, but that he is a competent founder, even if of a regime in his own interest; Socrates, on the other hand, is an oblivious corruptor. The former methodically establishes a new regime; the latter is utterly

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unconcerned with civic order and blindly undermines it.[37] Peisetairos's revolution is bold: it overthrows the Olympian gods and leaves Peisetairos in Zeus's bed as well as his shoes. But it is also cautious: he establishes new gods, governs these gods, and insists on at least some fundamental laws. Peisetairos is a radical revolutionary, but he is also a conservative founder.

Consider Socratic natural science as presented in the *Clouds*. It flatly denies the existence of Zeus, appears to deny as well the existence of all deities that might reward justice or punish injustice (*Clouds* 366–81, 404–7, 247, 1467–71), defends the beating of fathers and mothers (1405–46), substitutes the authority of teachers for that of parents (1432, 1464–66), encourages at least some young people to pay careful attention to the reasons for living unjustly (886), shows no solicitude for the defeated case for justice (1105–6), appears to takes incest lightly (1369–72), and fosters especially the pleasure of looking with contempt upon the established law (1399–1400).[38]And then the chief practitioner of this science is caught off guard when he gets into trouble!

Now it is true that Socrates screens students for his school, and Aristophanes grants him the success of distinguishing well between the old and forgetful Strepsiades and his more capable son. His screening, however, is based on qualities requisite for students inside his school, not at all on the qualities requisite for the society in which his school is situated, and even the early stages of his screening process begin to corrode the beliefs that support the family and established laws of Athens. He may know what makes a good student; he does not appear to know or care what makes a good citizen.

As Socrates screens his students, so Peisetairos screens new citizens for Cloudcuckooland, and he rejects them all. His selectivity is underscored by contrast with the conduct of the birds, who make broad invitations and bold promises about the kind of life possible in the new city. Ignorant of their own limitations in multiple respects, the birds are ignorant also of the requirements of cities among men. Thus the birds proffer the wonderful invitation that whoever wishes to live pleasantly should come live with them: all that is shameful and held down by law among men is permitted and even noble among the birds, they alluringly declare. The birds clarify and support their invitation by citing five cases in which they would lift the restraints of law in favor of pleasure or nature (752–68). Peisetairos's deeds and words stand in sharp disagreement with this attractive openness of the birds, however. Indeed, he must effect a sort of Thermidorian reaction to bring a halt to the radical revolution they promise. He excludes eight

[37]Socrates's effect on others is not in every case immediately disastrous: perhaps he enriches the lives of his students. The disaster ensues from his oblivion or indifference regarding the relations between his thinkery and the larger society.

[38]I take Pheidippides's views to reflect those of the teacher he has so come to admire.

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people and welcomes no one to the new city (1343–71, 992–1020).[39] In the course of enforcing these limits, he defends the law and what is moderate and just (1045, 1345–57, 1433–35). He shows especially discerning treatment of the sycophant and the father beater, a type solicited by the birds and apparently defended by Socrates (*Clouds* 1405–39). He quickly grasps what kind of trouble they would create for his fledgling city, so he rebuffs or redirects them. When his words prove unable to dissuade visitors or wing seekers, he uses force: six of the eight are driven away with comic beatings.[40] The Peisetairos we see supervising his city is as concerned with enforcing law as the prerevolutionary Peisetairos was indifferent or manipulative in its regard. Peisetairos adroitly destroys the gods' empire to build his own; Socrates builds nothing lasting but clumsily contributes to the destruction of Strepsiades's family and his own school.

The differences between Peisetairos the founder and Socrates the teacher are suggested even within the *Birds* itself, for one of the visitors Peisetairos drives away has traits that remind us of Socrates.[41] Like Socrates, this Meton is consumed by natural and astronomical investigations, and like Socrates he is compared to Thales (1009, with *Clouds* 180). He is the only one of the eight visitors who in no way alludes to the hope of personal gain; his science and his practice of it appear to be his only motives for coming. He is also the only visitor who makes no references to laws or to gods, which may—along with his natural investigations—suggest he is less conventional than the others. But if Socrates's studies of natural science were in large measure responsible for the corrupting effect he had on Pheidippides and Strepsiades, it makes good sense for Peisetairos to drive away the astronomer Meton lest he pose a similar threat to his new city. In contrast to Socrates, that is, Peisetairos appears to hold that there are fundamental requirements for holding families and cities together and that nature does not supply them.

It is important in this connection to note again that Peisetairos does not simply "destroy the gods," as he had said he would; he also substitutes new gods for the ones he deposes. The importance of the gods in the new regime is indicated in part by the facts that the priest is the only person Peisetairos invites to Cloudcuckooland and by his determination to see that sacrifices are successfully offered to those he first calls "new gods," then "winged gods," and then simply "gods" (848, 862, 903, 1034, 1057). In

[39]The father beater is not strictly excluded; he is reformed and redirected as a soldier to the Thracian front. But he is not admitted on the terms promised by the birds, that the restraints of law would be superseded and that father beating in particular would be welcome (755–59).

[40]Dunbar, *Birds*, on lines 990 and 1397; 1018–19; 1030–31; 1050–51; and 1461–65.

[41]Little known today, Meton was apparently quite distinguished in his day. Dunbar stresses the similarities between Meton and Socrates, as does Strauss (Dunbar, *Birds*, 550–51; Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 175).

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keeping with his expulsion of Meton as well as with the price placed on the head of Diagoras the Melian atheist (1072–74), he does not defend an atheistic politics but seeks divinities—while also seeking to become a divinity—that are or seem to be more compatible with natural human wants. This may be one reason why, when the oracle monger delivers this broad warning, "Do not take the divine things lightly," Peisetairos does not respond with a contemptuous laugh; instead, he trumps the oracle monger's invocation of Bacis with a reference of his own to Apollo (961, 982). Rather than reject outright the oracle monger's claim, he creates a rival claim and traces it to a higher but similar authority, one the monger himself must recognize, even if Peisetairos himself does not (618–24, 584).

But if it is fair to say that the *Birds* does not indict Peisetairos for the tyranny the birds allow him to create, it nonetheless turns out that it does offer, *sotto voce*, a perspective from which to question his glorious successes. It is time to recall the problem his plan was initially intended to solve and that it was not the only plan presented as a solution. The initial problem was life in Athens and, in particular, its unpleasant litigiousness, so our heroes sought another city, one free from the constant hassles characteristic of Athens. Unimpressed by other cities mentioned as alternatives, Euelpides then considered abandoning not only Athens but all cities, so he could live like a bird: his proposal entailed leaving behind all laws and civic gods. Peisetairos's imperial plan is thus the third plan, not the only one.

Once it is set forth, Peisetairos's plan is never directly challenged, but the prior existence of Euelpides's plan affords a useful perspective from which to consider the imperial plan on center stage for most of the *Birds*.[42] Peisetairos's plan requires that he live a political life, that in some measure he live the life of the "busybody," one he had wanted no part of in Athens.[43] It must be stressed that he will now rule rather than merely share in ruling, will collect debts rather than pay them, and will be honored greatly; these are not inconsiderable improvements over his original situation, and Peisetairos may well think that they compensate for the trouble they cost him. Nevertheless, Euelpides implies by his interest in living like a bird and his withdrawal from Peisetairos's imperial project that it may be possible—at least for a winged character in a comedy—to escape the rule of both cities and gods, without going to the trouble of destroying or ruling them. One may live like a bird, without laws or gods, except perhaps with such gods as are the objects of the birds' beautiful songs, whereas Peisetairos's solution requires a resurrection of both gods and laws, at least

[42]Strauss is unusually clear on the importance of Euelpides for the *Birds*; I found his contrast between "birdism" and "Titanism," the respective principles of Euelpides and Peisetairos, to be especially helpful (*Socrates and Aristophanes*, 181).

[43]*Polypragmōn* at 471 contrasts with *apragmona* at 44.

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for those over whom he rules.[44] As for himself, Peisetairos must lead a life of vigilant rule, a life Zeus apparently did not deem satisfying![45] Nor does he seem much to enjoy it, as he gets vexed with the priest he brings in to do the sacrifices, and with the eight human beings who come uninvited. I admit again that the honor he wins must be satisfying, and yet our heroes left Athens for the sake of private pleasures, not honor (33). If it is reasonable to speculate on Aristophanes's own choice of lives when reflecting on the opposed alternatives represented by Peisetairos and Euelpides, he appears to have found a way to enjoy himself, while also finding an intellectual escape from the laws and their divine backers, without taking on the burden of ruling others. Nor is he even lacking in deserved honor.

[44]Although "Peisthetairos" is the reading of the manuscripts, editors object that this word is formed on the passive stem of the verb, as no other surviving names apparently were, and that it suggests "persuaded by his companions," whereas the play shows Peisetairos to be the arch-persuader (Dunbar, *Birds*, 128–29). Were I to try to defend the use of the passive, I would speculate that perhaps Peisetairos has been too quickly persuaded to think that the life of ruling is best. Might an unexamined desire to rule escape the sort of scrutiny to which he subjects justice and the gods, which oppose this desire?

[45]It is awkward to discuss the life of a god who does not exist, but the picture of Zeus in the *Birds* is one of a god who does not take an active interest in ruling (726–28). What little he is reported to do he does through delegation, even when his own most vital interests are at stake. The "wages" for ruling may be considerable, but—from a certain perspective—the burdens of office are far greater (cf. Plato, *Republic* 346e7–347d8).

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