

Sophia in Aristophanes' *Birds*

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A discussion of *sophia* in Aristophanes is an appropriate tribute to Abraham Wasserstein; besides his wide interests in ancient philosophy and science, he embodied *sophia* in all its positive senses — intellectual ability, technical skill, and also that humane understanding of moral principles which produces wise and virtuous attitudes and actions.¹ The use of *sophia* and its cognates in *Birds* has lately produced bold assertions about that comedy and its central figure; this paper examines what I see as a misinterpretation of the play.

T.K. Hubbard's recent book on Aristophanes² has been justly greeted as substantially contributing to the study of central aspects of the plays, in particular the thematic relation of the parabasis to the dramatic action. Remarkably few scholars, however, have discussed the section on *Birds* in chapter 8, which expounds a controversial view of Peisetairos.³

Many critics from antiquity onwards, looking for some relation between the action of *Birds* (produced 414 BC) and contemporary events, have found it in the sending of the Sicilian Expedition (summer 415), but with widely varied conclusions on the degree of detailed correspondences and the personal stance of the poet.⁴ For Hubbard (159), the event reflected in the plot is the *furor*, shortly

The following works are cited by abbreviations:

Bowie: A.M. Bowie, *Aristophanes. Myth, Ritual and Comedy* (Cambridge 1993).

Dunbar: *Aristophanes, Birds, edited with Introduction and Commentary by N. Dunbar* (Oxford 1995).

Heberlein: F. Heberlein, *Pluthygieia: zur Gegenwelt bei Aristophanes* (Frankfurt-am-Main 1980).

Hubbard: T.K. Hubbard, *The Mask of Comedy. Aristophanes and the Intertextual Parabasis* (Ithaca N.Y. and London, 1991).

MacDowell: D.M. MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens. An Introduction to the Plays* (Oxford 1995).

Sommerstein: *Aristophanes, Birds, edited with translation and notes by A.H. Sommerstein* (Warminster 1987).

¹ K.J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the time of Plato and Aristotle*, 1974, 119-22, examines the semantic range of the terms.

² The book came into my hands too late for discussion in the commentary on *Birds*.

³ But see now MacDowell's criticisms in his *Birds* chapter, pp. 223-4. Hubbard retains the linguistically impossible and meaningless Πεισθέταιρος; see the arguments in Dunbar, *Birds* pp. 128-9 for preferring Πεισέταιρος (or Πειθ-) to Πισθέταιρος.

⁴ See Dunbar pp. 2-5 and the survey in MacDowell pp. 222-3.

before the Expedition set sail, caused by the mutilation of the Herms and the parodying in private houses of the Eleusinian Mysteries. He sees (161) the characterization of Peisetairos as clearly influenced by Aristophanes' recent revision of *Clouds*, generally dated to c. 417; *Birds* "illustrates in comically exaggerated form the ultimate consequences we should expect from the actions of the impious — the overthrow of Zeus and the elevation to divinity of anything the individual thinker desires, including tiny birds and even the thinker himself". Peisetairos is (162) "the master sophist, ... experiencing the ultimate triumph of the sophistic will to power which the miserable Socrates and Strepsiades could only dream of". This interpretation recalls that of W.W. Merry a century ago;⁵ for Merry, a clergyman and Doctor of Divinity, *Birds* is a "protest", under various forms of irony, against the threatened "breaking-up of the accepted forms of the state-religion, and ... the disappearance of all reverence ... for the national deities".

On this view, Peisetairos is a central character very unlike those of the earlier comedies, and the audience would respond to him very differently.⁶ In *Acharnians* and *Peace*, it is generally agreed, they were invited to sympathize with Dikaiopolis' and Trygaios' efforts to recover peace, in *Knights* to applaud the Sausage-seller's resourceful campaign against Paphlagon, in *Clouds* to feel some sympathy as Strepsiades struggles to overcome the financial problems caused by his son, and in *Wasps* to applaud Philokleon's spirited efforts to escape from the restrictions imposed by his dull son; but in *Birds*, if Hubbard is right, the audience was expected to see Peisetairos, not as a clever fellow-citizen in whose fantastic success they could vicariously enjoy seeing dreams come true, but as embodying the threat to Athens from irreligious sophistic doctrines coupled with a lust for power. There is no *a priori* objection to a not wholly or immediately sympathetic central figure; in the next extant play, *Lysistrata*, the (at least predominantly) male audience would hardly see Lysistrata as "one of us"; but is Peisetairos really portrayed as Hubbard sees him?

As evidence that Peisetairos is not just an exceptionally clever Athenian but a thorough-going sophist, Hubbard cites (162) a series of passages from *Birds*. In most of them he appears to take σοφός not as "skilful", "clever", "ingenious" (cf. n. 1), but as "sophistically educated", "having sophistic ideas", a sense not supported by the contexts. At 363, ὦ σοφώτατε, the comparison with the clever stratagems of the traditionalist Nikias rules out any idea of sophistry; cf. the same vocative at 1271-5, where the herald brings Peisetairos the gold crown awarded him by the human race σοφίας οὐνεκα;⁷ at 409 Tereus' description of Peisetairos and Euelpides (not Peisetairos alone!) as ξένω σοφῆς ἀφ' Ἑλλάδος

⁵ Aristophanes, *The Birds*⁴, by W.W. Merry, 19-20.

⁶ A distinction between the "farmer heroes" of Aristophanes' "peace-plays" and the "intellectual heroes" of *Birds* and *Ecclesiazusae* was already drawn and examined in detail by Heberlein, 137ff., but his interpretation of Peisetairos differs considerably from Hubbard's; see below.

⁷ For σοφία attributed to clearly non-sophistic heroes being congratulated on the success of their plan cf. *Ach.* 971-2, *Peace* 1028-31, and *Clouds* 1202, 1207 (Strepsiades' premature self-congratulation).

clearly refers, not to any personal sophistry, but to the belief of Greeks in general reflected in Herodotos (1.60.3) that they were cleverer than barbarians, and of Athenians in particular that they were the cleverest of all Greeks (*ibid.*); that σοφισμα occurs among the nouns denoting ingenuity in Tereus' sketch of Peisetairos in 428-31 no more implies a sophistic mentality than does χαρίεντά γ', ὦ πρεσβύτ', ἐσοφίσω καὶ σοφά, Kinesias' ironic praise (1401) of Peisetairos' clever version of "giving wings". None of these passages proves Peisetairos a sophist.

Hubbard is obviously right, however, to see (163) sophistic influence in Peisetairos' arguments in the agon — the rhetorical tricks, the use of τεκμήρια, many of them brazenly unsound, to prove hypotheses about the distant past when the birds were gods, which nevertheless completely convince the chorus birds. But to show Peisetairos cleverly using the techniques and tricks of rhetoric would not make him for the audience a sophist like the Aristophanic Socrates or his Worse Argument. The chief aim of the blatantly improbable arguments is surely to amuse the audience. Moreover, as Heberlein notes (134ff.), it is only in expounding his Grand Plan in prologue and agon that Peisetairos has these "intellectual traits"; in later scenes there is no further sign of them; this confining of "intellectual traits" to the revelation of the Grand Plan applies also to Praxagora in *Ecclesiazusae*, the other "intellectually superior comic hero".⁸ Heberlein sees in this use of rhetorical devices "the enrichment of the figures" ("die Anreicherung der Figuren"), on whose points a contrasted "countryman-figure" comments, in *Birds* Euelpides, who is not characterized elsewhere as a rustic.

An additional factor besides characterizing "intellectual superiority" may be at work here: the confining of rhetorical techniques to the expositions of the Grand Plan suggests that the poet in writing these speeches was also responding to — in A.M. Dale's words⁹ — "the rhetoric of the situation — what Aristotle calls δῖάνοια". For a Greek dramatist acquainted with rhetoric, as Aristophanes clearly was,¹⁰ "the dominating question is: What *points* could be made here?" (Dale). Just as Euripides gives his *Alcestis* (280ff.) and *Andromache* (*Andr.* 184ff.)¹¹ arguments and devices familiar from the orators, so in *Birds*, when

⁸ A more complicated situation exists with the sophistic rhetorical features in the long set speeches of Dikaiopolis (*Ach.* 496-556) and Lysistrata (*Lys.* 1124-61): both contain demonstrable parody of famous Euripidean clever speeches, Dikaiopolis' eloquence arises magically from donning Telephos' rags (446-7), and though Lysistrata claims (1126-7) to have learned speech-making from male relations, some inaccurate or tactless allusions to the past may be intended to undermine her points; see N.G. Wilson in *GRBS* 23, 1983, 157-63.

⁹ A salutary reminder that characterization may not be a Greek dramatist's primary concern is found in A.M. Dale's edition of Euripides' *Alcestis*, 1954, *Introduction* IV, "The characters and the action", with reference to *Alcestis*' arguments to Admetos against his remarrying.

¹⁰ E.g. *Nu.* 318, 875, 1058, 1408 with Dover's nn.

¹¹ See Euripides, *Andromache*, ed. M. Lloyd, 1994, nn. on 184-221; Lloyd suggests that this may also indicate *Andromache*'s intellectual superiority over Hermione.

Peisetairos expounds an inherently improbable thesis, the poet uses rhetorical devices to make his speech as effective as possible; formal speeches in agons require proper rhetorical treatment. This displays not only Peisetairos' "intellectual superiority" as a clever manipulator of sophistic persuasion but also Aristophanes' skill as a *logographos*, giving his character the most brilliant speech he can, to entertain an audience accustomed to enjoying clever arguments in the Assembly and lawcourts. The poet's use of these devices would not make the audience think him a sophist, although they thought of him, he hoped (e.g. *Clouds* 520), as a σοφός ("skilful") poet.

Sophistic training in the art of persuasion would increase a man's political influence; several recent critics have found a political significance in the name Πεισέταιρος (or Πειθέταιρος). Hubbard (160) and Bowie (171) believe that it suggests not only πειθῶ (surely not a monopoly of sophists and their pupils), but an association with the oligarchic political clubs (ἐταιρεῖαι) which were increasingly active at the time. But although the name Peisetairos may have suggested to the audience, or some of them, the oligarchic clubs, it clearly need not have done so. Nothing elsewhere in the play suggests that Peisetairos has persuaded any fellow-oligarchs to do anything, nor is he seen persuading, or trying to persuade, any such persons. On the other hand, ἐταῖροι at this period "was at all times used for persons engaged in any sort of joint enterprise, and not only for the members of a ἐταιρεία or ἐταιρικόν" (Gomme-Andrewes-Dover, *HCT* on Thuc. 8.54.4). This wider sense is demonstrated in the comedy. We see Peisetairos persuading several persons to join in his ambitious enterprise: first Euelpides, whom he persuades to accompany him to birdland (339-40), then the Hoopoe, whom he persuades to support his plan for a bird-city (162-97), and later the Chorus, who having threatened to kill him are persuaded to accept his revelations (539-47) and plan (627-35), and to join in carrying it out (636-7). He persuades them all to become his ἐταῖροι. Another use of ἐταῖρος, for one of a group of friends who drink together (as at *Peace* 1132 the chorus look forward to drinking by the fire μετ' ἀνδρῶν ἐταίρων φίλων), clearly fits Euelpides, the friend from Athens.

The social status of Peisetairos (and Euelpides) is uncertain because, unlike the earlier comedies, *Birds* gives little biographical information about the main characters in the opening scenes. At 30ff. one of the two¹² explains to the audience that they have left Athens voluntarily, because they are tired of the constant activity of its lawcourts, a theme already satirized at length in *Wasps*. Their self-description (33) as φυλῆ καὶ γένει τιμῶμενοι presumably means that they are of respectable social standing, as belonging to both a clan (*genos*) and a tribe, but the audience would not infer that they must belong to the aristocratic élite, the traditional governing class; the evidence suggests that by the fourth century, and no doubt earlier, membership of a *genos* "presupposed neither social eminence nor great wealth" (C. Carey, edition of Apollodorus, *Against Neaira* [Warminster 1992], 115). The point of 33-5 is that the two, recognised as

¹² Distribution of lines between Peisetairos and Euelpides is very uncertain in the opening scenes; Dunbar pp. 132-3 gives 27-48 to Euelpides, Sommerstein with Marzullo to Peisetairos.

respectable citizens of unimpeachable Athenian descent, have “flown off without anyone shooing us away (οὐ σοβούντος οὐδενός)” unlike the alleged barbarian nicknamed Sakas, who is trying to force his way in (by claiming to be a citizen). These few details are likely to have aroused the audience’s sympathy for Peisetairos and Euelpides; they too knew the vexation and anxiety of life in competitive, hyper-democratic Athens. What is disputed is whether this initial sympathy is forfeited by things said later.

Heberlein (49-51) believes that this initial impression, that the pair are honourable refugees from Athenian litigiousness, is “ironically corrected” at 115-16, when “it becomes clear that they have debts which they are unwilling to repay, a circumstance which gives Athenian litigiousness a quite direct significance for them ... They thus become fugitives (Ausreisser) ...”. For Heberlein this revelation removes audience sympathy from the two; neither would any longer be seen as “one of us”; but MacDowell (201) infers from essentially the same interpretation of 115-16 (reluctance to pay debts the reason for leaving Athens) that the vagueness with which the pair’s financial problems are indicated “helps the individual spectator to identify himself with them; ... many would assume that the ... problems were like their own, and so would sympathize with them and share their desire for a carefree place to live”.

MacDowell is surely right against Heberlein on the likely audience-reaction to such lines in a comedy, but the inference drawn by both from 115-6 is insecure. Peisetairos’ explanation for coming to birdland is not that they have left Athens to avoid paying their debts, but that Tereus, now a bird, has earlier been a man, and had human experiences like them, here jokingly specified, with the cynical view of human behaviour normal in comedy, as “owing money and liking to avoid paying it back”. The point of this explanation is signalled by the preliminary πρῶτα μὲν ἦσθ’ ἄνθρωπος in 114: Tereus’ twofold experience as man and bird uniquely qualifies him to tell them of some congenial, trouble-free city. If few listeners would remember the earlier statement that nobody is chasing them out of Athens (34), and notice the discrepancy with their emigrating to escape creditors, few would now connect reluctance to pay debts with the δίκαι of 38-41: “So this is the real reason why they left — they were afraid of being sued for debt!”

Hubbard’s explanation (170) for the departure from Athens illustrates the danger of extracting isolated sentences from a long dramatic text and juxtaposing them to find a latent significance. By connecting 33-41 (Athenian lawcourt-mania) and 145-7 (rejecting the suggestion of settling in a city by the sea), he deduces that the *real* reason for the pair’s leaving Athens is not a surfeit of lawsuits, which will certainly have increased because of the recent Herm-mutilation and Mysteries scandals, but personal implication in those criminal sacrileges. They are in danger of prosecution if they remain, and if they now settle by the sea, they fear that the Salaminia may arrive to arrest them, as had happened recently to Alkibiades (Thuc. 6.52, 61). The critics who have been content to see in 145-7 a topical allusion to the disgraced Alkibiades are surely right; Hubbard, it seems, expects the audience both to recall the reference to Athenian litigiousness in 38-41, and at the same time to forget (34-5) οὐ σοβούντος

οὐδενός/ἀπεπτόμεσθ' ἐκ τῆς πατρίδος; to interpret this as "(they) are going into *self-imposed* exile, to escape prosecution", does not fit the text.

It is unwise to credit a theatre audience with the power of near-total recall implied in Hubbard's interpretation. A fine Cambridge critic of half a century ago, F.L. Lucas, discussing what demands may be made on an audience,¹³ wrote: "Too minute criticism of drama is particularly dangerous, because here the gulf yawns so wide between the audience watching the swift traffic of the stage and the solitary student under his lamp. Midnight oil gives a very different illumination from footlights. ... Just as jokes that take ten minutes to see are usually poor jokes, so dramatic points that take centuries to see are usually pointless". This truth is particularly relevant to Hubbard's approach to Aristophanes, whose comedies are not carefully composed detective dramas, in which a seemingly innocent remark in an early scene becomes an important clue to guilt when compared with something said later. More probably, then, the audience, having heard that Peisetairos and Euelpides have left Athens to escape its lawcourt mania, learn nothing later in the opening scenes to remove their sympathy for two fellow-citizens trying to escape from what troubles them all.

Serious difficulties in seeing Peisetairos as "master sophist" with tyrannical ambitions arise when we consider the new city and Peisetairos' relation to it. One of the city's most striking features is a lack of definite and consistent characteristics. Its very name surely indicates its nature as nebulous, insubstantial and perpetually changing. Proposals for establishing political institutions are notably absent from Peisetairos' speeches, nor are any reported later to have been adopted, but it would be rash to deduce that this is because he has ambitions to rule alone by force. The few statements in the comedy that have been used as evidence for Cloudcuckooland's *politeia* do not suggest that Aristophanes was concerned to depict the city's internal workings, or that he expected his audience to remember those details and combine them into a constitution. The search for clues to political structures in Cloudcuckooland produces only two mutually contradictory allusions (which will be discussed at length below): at 1583-5 we hear of an "attempted rebellion against the democratic birds", but at 1708 Peisetairos is referred to as the birds' *τύραννος*. This discrepancy is more convincingly explained by the poet's habitual unconcern for consistency than by any intention to signal a sinister slide, uncharted in the text, from democracy to tyranny. We are dealing with a comic poet noted for cheerful carelessness over loose ends and inconsistencies, not with Plato in the *Republic*, gradually constructing his just city from a series of significant details.¹⁴ Attempts to find in Cloudcuckooland a consistent political structure must fail for lack of evidence. We are left to infer, from a series of implied negatives, what the city is not going to be; these emerge as the more political of the successive visitors arrive, and they reveal that the only city whose institutions and habits interest Aristophanes is Athens.

¹³ *Greek Drama for Everyman*, 1954, pp. xiv-xv. Cf. MacDowell (223): "for the Athenian audience the first sight of a play was the only sight. ... Aristophanes knew that any satirical point he wished to make must be clear and obvious".

¹⁴ See MacDowell, pp. 226-7, refuting views of Cloudcuckooland as the ideal city.

Critics disagree about the implications of Peisetairos' treatment of some of the visitors who come hoping to offer services or acquire wings. We need not discuss the ejection of the Oracle-monger (959ff.), a type already satirized as a greedy charlatan in *Peace* (1046-1126); that the bird-city, unlike Athens in recent months (Thuc. 8.1.1), refuses to give such undesirables a hearing, is seen by most, including Bowie (170), as indicating the superiority of Cloudcuckooland (and, it follows, of its leader). But Bowie, along with Hubbard, sees as a negative feature Peisetairos' ejection of the next arrival, Meton, described by both critics as a town-planner. He is dismissed, for Bowie (170), "because Peisetairos thinks him an *alazon*", but "such people can be seen to have a legitimate role in a god-fearing democracy with an empire to control". Against this we may say first that there is no evidence that for the audience the real Meton was a town-planner; rather, he was known as a geometer and astronomer,¹⁵ and his design for the city in the air, as he says himself, would give it the shape of a star. Town-planning did already exist — Hippodamos had designed the Peiraeus — but planned towns were not star-shaped. Second, Meton as an astronomer is a μετεωροσοφιστής — in the eyes of the majority an undesirable type, arousing suspicion of impiety, exactly the type already termed *alazon* in *Clouds* (95-104; cf. *Birds* 1016-17 for Meton taking the term to refer to himself). Probably most of the audience would have agreed that Meton's investigations of μετέωρα made him an undesirable citizen; compare the Platonic Socrates' references (*Ap.* 18b-c, 23d) to the suspicions always aroused by such study. Thus his ejection would be seen as a plus for Cloudcuckooland in contrast to Athens, and for Peisetairos in throwing him out.

For Bowie (170) it bodes ill for Cloudcuckooland that Peisetairos likewise treats roughly the *Episkopos* who arrives as Meton flees, one of the Special Inspectors appointed, as Bowie rightly notes, to oversee the smooth running of the empire, clearly a crucial aspect of Athens' control. He enters carrying a pair of lawcourt voting-urns (τῶ κάδῳ, 1032); he is given no time to explain their purpose, but it is clearly to impose the Athenian lawcourt system on the new city. "These urns symbolise the democratic system, and there is apparently no place for them in Nephelococcygia ... Their absence [i.e. of lawcourts] removes the possibility of recourse to the courts". But this ignores the fact that in comedy lawcourts regularly symbolize the πολυπραγμοσύνη that bedevils life in Athens, so that freedom-from lawcourts is a gain for the new city. Aristophanes makes the point of the scene clear in Peisetairos' final comment (1033-4): "Isn't it an outrage? They are already sending inspectors to the city, even before our sacrifice to the gods!" "They" are the Athenian authorities, satirized here for the city's notorious international πολυπραγμοσύνη, the itch to interfere, with the noblest of declared intentions, in the affairs of other states. Moreover, this particular *Episkopos* is clearly a shameless crook; his prompt agreement (1025ff.) to take his fee and return home without doing the job he was sent to do would qualify him in the eyes of the audience for the beating that Peisetairos gives him. The same is true of the imperialist implications, crookery and violent ejection of the next visitor, the Decree-seller (1035ff.), who recites decree-

¹⁵ See Dunbar on *Birds* 992-1020.

excerpts exemplifying Athens' harsh treatment of other states, shamelessly alters for his own ends the text of the familiar decree on the use of Athenian weights and measures throughout the empire (1040ff.), and finally attempts an absurd piece of blackmail (1054). Once again the audience would surely applaud Peisetairos as a right-thinking citizen who knows how to treat a scoundrel, and once again the target is Athens, not Cloudcuckooland.

Not all critics agree about the different receptions given to the three later arrivals who hope for wings. When the would-be parricide is persuaded (1368ff.) not to throttle his father but to go off and serve as a hoplite in the Thraceward region, most critics see in this a morally sound attitude to fathers in Peisetairos and his city, certainly surprising after the audience have been invited in the parabasis (755-9) to join the birds and become free to fight their fathers as fighting-cocks do. Bowie however (170) notes that the youth "is freed from the obligation, firmly believed in by the Athenians, of looking after [his father]"; but this is nowhere said. Indeed, as the son is still (1362) a *νεανίσκος*, i.e. little, if at all, over 20, the audience are free to suppose that the father is still able to fend for himself, and that the son might grow out of his hostility and be ready to care for him in his old age.

Hubbard (171-2) takes a stronger line than Bowie on the parricide scene, and on the following scenes with Kinesias and the Sykophant. He acknowledges that some critics have seen in the expulsion of these undesirables "evidence of the hero's recognition that law is a necessary and integral part of any organized society", and have even inferred that Cloudcuckooland is a "just society"; but as this interpretation does not fit an unscrupulous sophist with tyrannical ambitions, he rejects it (172): "We should be more suspicious of Peisthetairos' motives, in view of his subsequent manipulation of the bird-state to his own advantage ... He may not be *defending* the claims of morality here so much as using them to consolidate his own social control over Cloudcuckooland". These three persons "introduce potentially disorderly and subversive influences ... which, unless channelled into appropriate activities, could threaten his power ...". Again the question arises, whether the light thus shed on the character's secret motive, unsupported by any textual evidence, comes from the footlights or from the midnight oil.

Two passages used as proof-texts by those who see Peisetairos as a sinister anti-democratic figure are (i) the revelation at 1583-5 that the meat being cooked consists of rebel birds, and (ii) the description of him at 1708 as the birds' *τύραννος*. To examine (ii) first: this passage, the herald's messenger-speech beginning at 1706, is conspicuously paratragic in both metre and diction; its tone, sustained, exceptionally for Aristophanes, at a very elevated level, is described by Richard Hunter¹⁶ as "dithyrambic". In Sophocles and Euripides,¹⁷

¹⁶ R. Hunter, *Eubulus: The Fragments*, 1983, 18.

¹⁷ See e.g. M. Pope, "The democratic character of Aeschylus' Agamemnon", in *Greek Tragedy and its Legacy: Essays presented to D.J. Conacher*, ed. M. Cropp, E. Fantham, S.E. Scully, 1986, 13-26, examining the semantic range and interrelation of *τύραννος* and *βασιλεύς*; cf. Pope, "Addressing Oedipus", in *Greece and Rome* 38, 1991, 156-70.

τύραννος, although it may refer to one who has become king other than by inheritance, and may be synonymous with the English “tyrant”, often overlaps with βασιλεύς, “hereditary king”; it need not imply “tyrant” in the sense of one who seizes power and holds it by force. So it is ignoring the literary context to infer from this passage that the audience will deduce that Peisetairos is now a tyrant in the modern sense, any more than they would have thought of the Sophoclean Oedipus as ruling tyrannically.

Some critics, however, see sinister significance even in Peisetairos as a monarch; why does Cloudecockooland need a king at all? Sommerstein, correctly translating as “monarch” at 1708, comments “So much for Peisetairos’ promise in the agon to restore sovereignty to the birds!” One obvious reply is that even if all the birds are now divine kings, they still need a leader bird to guide them; they have earlier declared (627-8) that they will never again differ from Peisetairos’ view. He himself now has wings, and therefore in comic logic is a bird, ever since he ate the magic root offered by the Hoopoe (654-5). If any further justification were needed for his becoming king, it may be found in one of the myths on which the plot of *Birds* is based, the Succession Myth in Hesiod’s *Theogony*;¹⁸ each successive king of the gods is deposed by his son, Ouranos by Kronos, and Kronos by Zeus, and the victorious son takes over the monarchy. The audience, knowing this pattern, would not be surprised that Peisetairos, not a son of Zeus but leader of a successful coup against him, is now the birds’ king.

In examining the other much-quoted passage (1583-5), where Peisetairos is cooking birds, we should note the poet’s cheerful inconsistency over Peisetairos’ bird-metamorphosis, no less great than that over the political structure of Cloudecockooland. After the parabasis (801ff.) he and Euelpides emerge from Tereus’ nest with wings, so for dramatic purposes they are now birds. Peisetairos when confronting gods regularly includes himself with “us birds” (1600) or “us gods” (1234, 1592), but when Poseidon sees him at 1581, he perceives him as “the man”; this is required by the context, in order to distinguish Peisetairos from the Chorus birds, but it does undermine the dramatic fiction. Similarly in the final scene (1726-8) the *Koryphaios* says that the birds now enjoy great good fortune “thanks to this man”; τόνδε τὸν ἄνδρα, though again interrupting the dramatic fiction, effectively reminds all concerned that for once birds are receiving good fortune, not disaster, from their ancestral enemy.

This inconsistency over Peisetairos’ bird-status is relevant to the roasting of rebel birds at 1583-5, where many critics have seen the sinister nature of his regime suddenly revealed. Sommerstein (ad loc.) first rightly notes that ἐπαλιστάμενοι is a present participle, i.e. “some birds were found guilty of trying to rebel against the democratic birds”, their action having presumably been nipped in the bud; but then he wonders what evidence there was of the birds’ guilt, who had found them guilty, and what kind of so-called democracy this implies. But would the audience wonder about these questions? They have heard nothing to suggest that the bird-city has a constitution at all, and this is the first they have heard of “the democratic birds”, let alone of any rebellion. It is also the last they hear of either democracy or rebellion. The bird chorus interest-

¹⁸ See Dunbar, *Birds* Introduction pp. 7-8.

ingly makes no comment here on the rebellion or its gruesome penalty, and neither is mentioned again.

How, then, should we interpret the roasting of rebel birds? At this point some cooking of meat is dramatically desirable, in order to expedite the negotiations with the starving gods. What can be cooked in the bird-city? An obvious solution would have been the goat that was sacrificed to the new gods (848, 958, 1057), wherever that goat may have come from; but it was written off at 901-2 as mere beard and horns, and the plot needed a more attractive menu.

In roasting and eating birds, Peisetairos shows himself a true Athenian. Although the bird-songs in the play show that the poet enjoyed birdsong, there is abundant contemporary evidence, both in Aristophanes and in the fragments of other contemporary comedies, that Athenians ate birds as a party dish.¹⁹ If you had asked an Athenian what ὄρνιθες made him think of, the answer, we may suppose, would usually have been δέιπνον. We have in this scene, I suggest, not a horrific picture of a cannibal tyrant devouring his subjects,²⁰ but another disrupting of the dramatic fiction that Peisetairos is now a bird himself. There is, indeed, irony here, but it is a fine comic irony in Peisetairos now doing himself what he had earlier (531-8) described as men's heartless treatment of birds. But if Peisetairos is here treating birds with cheerful heartlessness, that is how Athenians in general — the audience and no doubt Aristophanes too — habitually treated them, and they clearly saw nothing wrong in doing so.

It is easy to exaggerate the visual effect of this scene; since at 1583 Herakles asks what flesh is being cooked, clearly no unmistakable dead birds are visible; at 1688 we hear that the victims have already been cut up for cooking. The text rules out any such visual impact as in the recent Cambridge production (February 1995), where the audience saw the chilling spectacle of human-size birds brought out on an *ekkyklema*, trussed up and adorned with the white paper frills used to decorate meat chops.

The bird-roasting passage is best interpreted not as an isolated revelation about the bird-city but as a topical satirical comment on recent events in Athens itself. We may remember Aristophanes' earlier ridicule in *Wasps* (417, 463-507), of the chronic Athenian phobia about conspiracies against their democracy, now recently revived by the mutilated Herms and the parodied Mysteries (Thuc. 6.60.1). The audience, hearing these lines about roasting would-be rebels, would probably see not the bird-city's true nature revealed but *themselves* being gently satirized; in this matter too Peisetairos is a true Athenian, quick to crush possible threats to democracy.

It is therefore rash to see this very brief and jocular moment as throwing any light on Peisetairos and his regime. But in the spectacle of the birds' leader

¹⁹ Cf. e.g. *Ach.* 1007, *Nu.* 339, and Dunbar, "Aristophane, ornithophile et ornithophage", forthcoming in *Aristophane: la langue, la scène, la cité*, Actes du Colloque International (Toulouse, 17-19 mars 1994), to be published in 1996 by Levante Editori (Bari).

²⁰ Bowie p. 168: "Tereus the cannibal returns in Peisetairos, who will be discovered roasting birds", comparing Plato's reference (*Rep.* 571 D) to the tyrant who "refrains from no food".

telling Herakles that the flesh he is roasting is that of executed rebels, we do have for a moment a complex dramatic effect: both topical satire on Athenian over-reaction to allegedly anti-democratic activity and Peisetairos reverting briefly from bird to man.

There is no need to discuss at length Hubbard's contention (161) that Peisetairos represents "the ultimate consequences of what we should expect from the actions of the impious"; theories that in *Birds* Aristophanes is either himself undermining traditional Greek religion, or warning against those who attack it, rest on mistaken ideas of Greek attitudes to their gods, and of what treatment of gods was possible in comedy.²¹ Certainly Peisetairos' triumph over the Olympians far exceeds what happens to any gods in any other of the plays, but as he shows himself throughout far more σοφός than any other comic hero, so his ambitious dreams and their fulfilment are far greater. But there are interesting limits to his triumph in the final scenes; the audience see the same elderly Athenian as before, now absurdly equipped with wings, brandishing Zeus' thunderbolt, clasping a beautiful female and hailed by excited birds as "highest of the (new bird) gods" (1765); no mention now of the future status of the Olympians, or of Zeus' reaction to surrendering Basileia and the thunderbolt; no mention either of the sceptre, hitherto demanded for the birds. The last the audience has heard of the future relation of birds and Olympians is the proposal, accepted by the divine envoys (1606-31) and never countermanded, that the birds will "rule below" as viceroys for the Olympians.²² The old gods remain in heaven, but with less to do than before.

It is misunderstanding the spirit and conventions of Old Comedy to see a sinister, anti-democratic Peisetairos. He is portrayed as a clever (*sophos*), energetic and eloquent fellow-Athenian, certainly displaying these qualities to an exceptional degree, but essentially the same kind of man as many in the audience thought themselves to be. He achieves a fantastically grandiose, comically absurd, plan, and becomes (more or less) a bird and a god, but he remains a sound-minded old Athenian, keeping his new city free of all the nuisances who trouble Athens. The audience would admire his *sophia* and vicariously enjoy his amazing triumph, as they had earlier enjoyed the lesser triumphs of Dikaiopolis and Trygaios.

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²¹ See K.J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, 1972, 30-3; MacDowell 216-21.

²² For the interesting limits to Peisetairos' triumph see Dunbar pp. 10-14.