

# THE BIRDS

A play by Aristophanes

Revised And Illustrated



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Ayal Pinkus





*The Birds*  
*A play by Aristophanes*

*Translator uncredited*  
*Revised And Illustrated*

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# INTRODUCTION

The play “The Birds” by Aristophanes was performed in Athens in 414 BC, not long after the start of the “*Sicilian Expedition*,” a big military campaign that was already in trouble when they put on this play, and which Athens ultimately lost devastatingly.

Scholars have, over time, tried to find political allegories in the play, looking for similarities between the play and the political situation at that time. The main character tries to gain power by making promises he never intends to keep. And the events in this fictional story might have similarities with the Sicilian Expedition, where the Athenians tried to capture Sicily to gain control over trade between Corinth and Syracuse.

But what strikes me about this play is that it is ambiguous in what it appears to try to say.

The first metaphor I noticed, which resonated with me, was that the play demonstrates a mechanism you can see in our society today; the power of trying something new others haven't tried yet, and that ultimately becomes surprisingly successful.

Think Apple's *beautiful* computers, Tesla's *electric* cars, and *crowdfunding* for publishing books. No one thought those worth pursuing before someone proved these ideas could lead to outsized success.

But that's one interpretation of it—some metaphors in the play comment on other sides of human nature.

For example, it also shows how successful intermediaries—gatekeepers—ultimately control the interactions between groups. Think banks that stand between lenders and borrowers. Ironically, the two men in the story flee the gatekeeping in Athens, only to eventually become gatekeepers themselves.

Two men find a new area inhabited by others and can't resist claiming ownership of it. Seen that way, it is also a comment on how humanity can not stop itself from colonizing new worlds it encounters. It can be seen as showing how men tend to try to dominate their surroundings aggressively.

And how humans often con others for personal gain.

As the two men take control of birds and their natural habitat, it also becomes a comment on how humans abuse nature to their advantage any chance they get.

Of the two men, one is the leader, the manager, who doesn't do much other than coming up with cunning plans that only benefit him, and as such, that is a comment on how people in power behave.

The play doesn't explicitly state the moral of its story, and because of that ambiguity, it is rich in meaning and the ways it can be interpreted.

I have taken the text from an uncredited translator, revised it heavily for language readability, and I put the mechanisms mentioned above center stage. I tried to leave out the jokes as they referred to people of their time, and a modern audience would not understand the humor.

Two well-off Athenians are tired of the scheming going on in their city, and they decide to try something no one else is doing. What could come of a collaboration with birds?

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# THE BIRDS



**Euelpides and**



**Pisthetaerus walk**

**through a wild, desolate countryside with broken rocks  
and brushwood all around them.**



**carries a basket with pots and pans and follows**

**a jay, and**



**follows a crow.**



(To his jay)

So now you're telling me to walk to  
*that* tree, over there?



(To his crow)

Damned beast! Are you now telling me  
that I should go *back*? Make up your  
mind!



We are exhausted, you horrible bird!  
We have been wandering around for  
days now, and you keep directing us  
back to the same spot!



Why did I listen to this stupid crow! It has made us walk for more than one hundred miles!



I agree. Why did I listen to this jay when all it does is infuriate me!



If I only knew where we were...



You don't know how we could go back to our home city?



No, I don't think I do.



Oh no!



Yes, my friend, I'm afraid we're lost.

That horrible bird-seller!

He made us believe that these two guides could lead us to His Hoopiness, the bird who was once the human king Tereus.

He sold me this jay for a silver coin, and you that crow for three, but what can these birds *do*?

Their directions don't make any sense.

(To his jay)

What do you want us to do *now*?



Do you want us to fling ourselves head-first down these rocks? There is no road that way!



There's not even a hint of a track in any direction.



And what does the crow say about the road we should follow?



Wait, it wants to tell me something.



Oh, pray tell.

What does it want us to do now?



Oh, never mind. It's just biting my fingers.

Great...

We left our city to find the birds, but we haven't had much luck so far.

(To the reader)



It's not that I hate the city we come from.

I mean, we both come from respected and wealthy upper-class families, but the Athenians spend their whole lives in lawsuits, with lots of snitches running around to tell on you. I'm just fed-up with all of it.

I hate life there so much, and it just makes me long for the peace and quiet of the countryside!

And so here we are, far away from home with only a basket and a stew-pot, in search of a quiet place in the countryside where we can settle.

We're looking for His Hoopoeness, the human king who once turned into a bird.

He must have flown around a lot.



Maybe he knows a quiet place where we can live in peace.



Look! There!



What is it?



The crow has been pointing me to something up there for some time now.

And the jay is also opening its beak and craning its neck to show me something.

Clearly, there are some birds over there.



We will know for sure if we make a noise to startle them.



Do you know what you should do? You should knock your leg against this rock.



I have a better idea: why don't you hit your head against that rock instead. It will make a louder noise.



Well, then, use a stone instead.



Why didn't I think of that!



***grabs a stone and starts hammering hard with it on a rock.***



Hey there! You! Servant! Servant!



What are you doing! You are yelling, "servant," to summon His Hoopoeness! It would be much better if you shouted, "His Hoopoeness, His Hoopoeness!"



Well then, okay. His Hoopoeness!  
Must I knock again? His Hoopoeness!



**arrives.**



Who's there? Who calls my master?



(Looking at



)

**Wow, you have an enormous beak!**



(Looking at



and



)

**Good god, evil bird catchers!**



He is scary.

What a horrible monster.



**Go away, evil humans!**





But we are not human.



What are you, then?



I am a bird, too.



That is nonsense.



You don't have to fear us.

We want to be a part of the bird  
community.



Hmmm...



But you, yourself, in the name of God!  
What kind of an animal are *you*?



Why, I am a servant-bird.



Whom do you serve?



When my master was turned into a bird, he begged me to become a bird also, to follow and to serve him.



Why would a bird need a servant?



It is probably because he used to be a human.

Sometimes he wants to eat a plate full of small fish; and then I take a plate and fly away to fetch him some.



And sometimes, when he wants some pea-soup, I grab a ladle and a pot and I run to get it for him.



Would you be so kind as to please call your master for us?



But he has just fallen asleep after he ate too many berries.



Doesn't matter; I want you to wake him up.

Fine.



I think he will be angry if I do, but I will wake him up anyway, just to please you.