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MEN AND BIRDS

The topic of this paper is the *Birds* of Aristophanes. First I shall give some facts for those who might not wholly remember this comedy. The *Birds*, which is with 1765 lines, 22 roles and at least 5 actors the longest of all extant classical tragedies, was first produced in 414 BC, under rather turbulent political circumstances in Athens. The Sicilian expedition which had been started one year before was in full swing, even if the disaster of 413 could not yet be foreseen. However, Alcibiades was recalled to stand trial for impiety, fled to Argos, was in absence condemned to death, and finally made politics against the official Athens from Sparta.

These political circumstances are hardly noticed in the *Birds*: there are only a few marginal allusions to Nicias and the expedition against Sicily. Rather the opposite can be found: a mentality of escapism and a flight from reality, as the two main characters, Peisetairos and Euelpides, weary of Athens, leave the city to make their home in the area of the birds. This structure is certainly analogous to the Sicilian expedition — leaving Athens and heading for destinations which are distant and relatively unknown — but the comedy's atmosphere still differs greatly from this context. The political features which really dominate Aristophanes' earlier comedies are replaced by fairytale, the animal comedy known to us only from a few fragments of other poets of Old Comedy (Crates, Eupolis, Magnes), and utopia in a literal sense, as the two main characters are going to build a new city in the nowhere of the clouds, in "Cloudcuckooland".

Past commentators used to see a hidden political theme, a political allegory, in the play. Hence, for example, the two emigrants Peisetairos and Euelpides stood for Alcibiades and Gorgias, the birds were the gods and the gods the Spartans. All these interpretations are contradictory and unconvincing. Thus, in the last decades of philology it has rather been accepted that one should not ask at all about the sense and meaning of this

comedy: it was the product of the fantasy of the poet who as with a *Lanterna magica* illuminates a fairytale world. So Albin Lesky writes in his famous history of Greek literature: "In this play free flight of fantasy is more important than the proceeding from a concrete political thought"¹. And Hans-Joachim Newiger emphasises (in the preface to Seeger's translation) "the timeless fairytale character", the "poetical flight of the birds", and the "fine ideas" which "dominate the whole play"².

We must realise first that the original aim of the two dropouts, to escape the activity of the polis and reach for the quiet naturalness of the tranquil world of the birds, is not achieved. Rather, an activity following the Athenian example is brought into the birds' domain. Peisetairos becomes the ruler of this activity, but at the price of the subjection of the birds. So the result is a double negation — not directly, but in subtle refraction: the two dropouts *negate themselves as Athenians and yet fail to establish themselves as natural inhabitants after their arrival in the world of the birds, in contrast to their declared aim.* Thus, the comedy adopts an ambiguous profundity that is not seen in Aristophanes' early plays.

The problems resulting from this tension are still far from being fully explained, even in more recent investigations like the new commentary of Nan Dunbar, published in Oxford in 1995 after a preparation time of forty years, and containing (on almost 700 pages) besides many single explanations mainly the zoological verification of the ornithological details³. I would like to try to move somewhat closer to an understanding of the play, though restricted to only one aspect: the presentation of relations between man and bird in this comedy.

It is regarded as *communis opinio* that for the Greeks of the fifth century animals (and therefore also birds) were regarded not as creatures of the free, rural nature that man contemplates from a distance, but as endowed with a demonic power. In the animal mask of the theatre the memory of the cultic-ritual origin of comedy lived on, while the animal was not perceived as a zoological being until the development of science in the fourth century (with Plato, Speusipp, Aristotle etc). And the animal as part of a rural nature which is experienced by man was only a Roman or possibly Hellenistic perspective.

¹ Albin Lesky, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, 2. Aufl., Bern 1963, 478.

² Aristophanes, *Sämtliche Komödien*, translated by Ludwig Seeger, edited by Hans-Joachim Newiger, München 1976, 292.

³ Aristophanes, *Birds*. Edited with introduction and commentary of Nan Dunbar, Oxford 1995.

In my opinion, this general view is especially inaccurate with regard to the *Birds* of Aristophanes. Aristophanes cannot be cast in this mould, as his relation to nature and animal is very differentiated and strangely refracted through the medium of the comic. Aristophanes certainly uses the opposition of city and rural nature in which the birds lead an idyllic and tranquil life. This is even a central theme throughout the whole comedy, as in the beautiful song at the end of the prologue in which the hoopoe and the nightingale call the other birds, in the parade of the birds in the parodos in which 24 different species of birds are presented and in the antode of the second parabasis (1088-1100) where the chorus praise themselves as "happy tribe of winged birds" (εὐδαίμων φῦλον πτηνῶν οἰωνῶν) and continue: "I dwell among the leaves in the bosom of the flowery meadows, when the divine-voiced cicada, drunk with the sunshine, in the noonday heat sounds out his high-toned song. And I winter in hollow caverns [...] and in spring we feed on the virginal white-swelling myrtle-berries". This is already pure bucolic.

In strong contrast to this emerges a totally different central theme which seems to us terrible and almost modern rather than comical. This is the threat to and harming of birds by men and conversely of men by birds. On the one hand we think of hunting for songbirds that end up in the cooking pot, of gourmet meals with nightingale ragout, blackbird breast in red wine, starling spit and heron fillet. On the other hand, we imagine the threat to men by masses of birds, as horribly overstated in Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds* and similarly in the American film *Brewster McCloud* (1970), directed by Robert Altman. It could be objected that these thoughts import very modern problems into old comedy. However, all this is demonstrably to be found in Aristophanes' play, and overlooking this theme has obstructed a convincing interpretation. In the following discussion of the comedy this shall become clear.

The two Athenians have bought two birds at the bird-market, a jackdaw and a crow, which should show them their way out of Athens. Although the birds fulfil this task only with rather inadequate gestures, they at least bring the two men to the hoopoe to whom they make their request. After some discussions the hoopoe is willing to admit the two arrivals, who claim only to seek a comfortable life in the world of the birds, and to give them a home subject to the other birds' consent. Thus, there is a kind of democracy among the birds, as the hoopoe is in a prominent position, but not the birds' ruler. The problem of the communication between man and bird which Aristophanes in the fictional fairytale context did not have to take into account is realistically noticed and solved in a very elegant way. Aristophanes incorporates here a myth that was probably treated shortly

earlier in Sophocles' tragedy *Tereus*, where Zeus punishes Tereus and his wife Procne for a crime by changing them into birds, Tereus into a hoopoe and Procne into a nightingale. In Aristophanes' play, the hoopoe is aware of his human past: not only is he able to speak himself, but he has also taught the human language (Greek, of course) to the other birds, formerly "barbarians", (ἐγὼ γὰρ αὐτοὺς βαρβάρους ὄντας πρὸ τοῦ ἐδίδαξα τῆν φωνήν, 199f.). So the antithesis between Hellenes and barbarians is transferred to the relation between man and bird in accordance with the ability to speak. Thus, the hoopoe is the bridge between man and bird. Without him the two Athenians would neither have come to the area of the birds nor have had any chance of communication. Correspondingly the two bought birds which appear in the prologue cannot communicate with the two Athenians through words, but only through gestures. After their arrival in the world of the birds, the Athenians for the first time have to face the aggression of the birds in a long scene of argument (327-340). Here men and birds are in principle regarded as equal, but men are considered to be the birds' natural enemies. The mere presence of the two men is a provocation for the birds, for the human race had shown itself hostile (πολέμιον, 335) towards the birds from the very beginning. At once, the birds want to tear the two arrivals into pieces, they speak of biting, scratching, pushing, hitting, fighting and beating and call them "fodder for our beaks" (348). Man and bird are enemies by nature (τῆν φύσιν ἐχθροί, 371) and here men are obviously threatened by birds who form up their attack in an almost military way, while the two intruders try to defend themselves with saucepans and spits, the same things they usually use for consuming birds.

Finally the weapons are put down, and — as often in Aristophanes — there is a so-called agon. This, however, does not take its usual form of a debate on two different points of view, but comprises a strong attempt by Peisetairos to influence the birds, following the principle that it is possible to learn from enemies (375). It is now very important that the birds understand the human language, for by means of sophist rhetoric they are persuaded in quasi-scientific argumentation that they had originally been the rulers over nature and thus also over man, while they were now subjugated. Nevertheless, they would be able to regain their original position, if they united in a polis, blocked off the air space to the gods, and ensured that in future human beings would make sacrifice to them rather than to the gods. The birds, thus far content with their natural life, are persuaded that they miss something. Peisetairos has made them dissatisfied and roused desires with all the arts of mass psychology. With rather brutal shock therapy he has shown them their present fate as the opposite of their glorious past and

possible future, pointing to the utility of birds as merchandise: "now they treat you as slaves, imbeciles, dummies. They've come now to throwing stones at you, like they do at madmen; and in the very sanctuaries, every fowler sets things to catch you — nooses, limed twigs, snares, nets, traps. Then, when they've caught you, they sell you by the batch, and the customers feel you over when they buy you. But they don't even just have you roasted and served up: they grate on cheese, oil, vinegar, and they mix another dressing, a sweet and oily one, and they sprinkle it over you hot, just as if you were carrion meat" (523-538). This description is no less drastic than modern methods of using poultry, and its comical point is that the prepared poultry meat, so to say, is addressed personally, which does not fail to impress the birds. The birds regard Peisetairos as their saviour and submit to him with the solemn promise: ἔγώ σοι... οἰκετεύσω (546) — "I will be your slave".

All that was pastoral in the naturalness of the birds' life has now disappeared. But so also has the original wish for a non-committal place of refuge, the aim of two comfort-seeking individualists, become realised as an intrusion that imposes hierarchical structures in an area of nature. The birds are initially promised a ruling position; and seized by the wish for power, they submit to man, at least to Peisetairos, without really noticing and under the illusion that they rule themselves. And now there is a strange change of viewpoints, for the motif: 'threat to human by birds' is taken up by Peisetairos. Although he is human himself, he advises the birds what to do with human beings who do not recognise them as gods. A whole cloud of sparrows should gobble up the seed in the fields, so that Demeter must dole out wheat to the starving humans. And the ravens should pick out the eyes of their sheep, and of the cattle with which they plough their land, — ἐπὶ πείρᾳ ("by way of a test"), as it is said in the text (583), as a sign of the power of the stronger. Peisetairos makes use of what he has learnt in Athens and, as his contemporary Alcibiades, gives advice directed against his own side, against man. The birds are enthusiastic. They even are willing — also on Peisetairos' advice — to give men who recognise them as gods some years of their longer avian life-expectancy, a fantastic fairytale thought. To the disadvantage of the present the birds make sacrifices for a vague aim far away in the future, motivated by an allegedly glorious past. The original aggression has been replaced by readiness to submit and enthusiasm for planning. Peisetairos and Euelpides **want to** get into a better world, the birds **are to** get into a better world, in which the official Olympic religion is abolished, — as in Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

Now the border between man and bird becomes blurred. Peisetairos and Euelpides magically grow wings by chewing a root. But even without such a manipulation the audience, traditionally addressed by the chorus in the parabasis, are offered a life as birds: "If any of you, spectators, wants to complete the rest of his days pleasantly among the birds, let him come to us" (753f.). And then a free life begins, independent from norms and limitations of human society. Already, one begins to question whether men become 'birds' if they escape from present circumstances. The individual desire of two dropouts becomes an undifferentiated promise of a happy life for all human beings. But the thought structure is not realistic, for it says at the end of the parabasis: "there is nothing more advantageous or more agreeable than to grow wings" (785). And this is followed by an unrealistic: "if one of you spectators were winged, and if he was hungry and bored with tragic performances, he could have flown out of here, gone home, had lunch, and then when he'd filled himself up, flown back here again to see us (that is the comic performances)" (786-789). This obviously does not mean a life in the world of the birds, but rather a metaphorical "wingedness" in the sense of inspiration. A thought is concretised by the comic poet's freedom temporarily to stray beyond physical reality.

Nevertheless, the thought of giving wings to everyone who desires is initially restricted to the parabasis with its stereotyped address to the audience, while immediately afterwards the dramatic situation is resumed. Peisetairos and Euelpides are now equipped with wings and look like specific birds, goose and blackbird respectively. The heralded city of birds is finally founded and named "Cloudcuckooland", a foundation sacrifice takes place which is interrupted by intruders several times, and a huge wall is built on which occasion Euelpides is sent away. So the character of Euelpides has finally left the action by the middle of the comedy, not only because the poet needs the actor for other roles, but mainly because Peisetairos shall ultimately appear as the only ruler of the empire of birds. Again the birds can feel like rulers over man. They want to kill all the pests sitting on trees and fruits (1058-1070) — with which they, without noticing, set their own food supply at risk —, and there is much talk about killing in general. Rewards for killing are even offered, and this is proclaimed in the new city of birds by a herald. "If any of you kills Diagoras the Melian, he'll receive a talent" (1074), — a considerable amount of money, equal to the daily earnings of 600 workers on the Acropolis of the Periclean age. The fourfold reward is offered to the one who extradites Philocrates, a trader of birds, alive — the man who had sold two guide birds to Peisetairos and Euelpides at the beginning (14). The description of his methods resumes the motif "sufferings of birds by

men". He strings together finches, blows air into thrushes, fills the nostrils of blackbirds with their own feathers, keeps captured pigeons imprisoned and forces them to act as decoys to lure other birds into his net (1077-1085). However, not only these drastically-described methods, but also the keeping of birds in general, is peremptorily declared as criminal. "If any of you", the chorus of birds say, turning to the audience, "keeps birds caged up in your courtyard, we order you to release them". The way crimes against birds shall be punished is no less cruel. If men do not obey, the tables are turned: they shall be strung together on the birds' estates (ὕμεις αὐ̂ παρ ἡμῖν, 1087) and, acting as decoys, lure other men (presumably to make them a prey of the birds). A macabre imagination!

In the meantime, the construction of the wall for the new city of birds has been finished. Peisetairos has done no work for it — in contrast to Euepides, the faithful companion, who by order of Peisetairos had to mix mortar and carry stones and buckets. Peisetairos is told about this miraculous work, done at knockdown prices by masses of birds: 30,000 cranes, 10,000 storks, and many others. "Why should anyone employ workers at standard wages any more? Peisetairos asks, surprised (τί δῆτα μισθωτοῦς ἄν ἐτι μισθοῖτό τις; 1153).

The wall surpasses all dimensions known so far. It has a height of one hundred fathoms — which is two hundred metres — and thus is twice as high as the wall of Babylon, confirmed through the description of Herodotus (I 178) as the highest wall known at that time. It is so broad that two chariots can pass each other in opposite directions along the top of it, as on a four-lane road. And as with every border wall, it is well-guarded: there are patrols, alarm bells, watches, and signal-fires on all towers (1158-1163).

At once, a border violation is reported. A god has flown in secretly — the winged messenger goddess Iris. Now the military defence is set into motion: 30,000 hawks and every bird with talons bent: kestrel, buzzard, vulture, great owl, eagle, "and the sky resounds with the rush and whistle of wings" (1182f.). With the words: τόξευε, παῖε (1187), Peisetairos gives the order to shoot; the birds are degraded to mere henchmen. Nevertheless, not they but Peisetairos catches Iris, who is at once questioned and asked for passport, permit, visa, and seal: "Did you make an approach to the Chief Jackdaws? Have you had a seal from the storks? [...] Wasn't there any Chief Bird, either, to stick an entry-pass on you?" (1212-1215). Iris, however, cannot be intimidated at all, not even by Peisetairos' threat to send more than 600 gigantic birds to destroy Zeus' palace. She just stays calm and does not take it at all seriously, which — as is characteristic for such a situation —

undermines the self-confidence of the border guard Peisetairos: "Oh, dash it all, can't you fly off somewhere else! (1260).

Despite these incidents, the new city of birds has a fascinating effect on human beings. A herald sent to the humans returns and reports an outbreak on ornithomania which is described as the latest fashion. People think they fly when they walk; they give themselves bird names; they sing songs about birds; and more than 10,000 ask for claws and wings to get into the city of birds. Baskets, buckets and barrels full of feathers are brought and sorted.

Concrete details are ignored by the poet, as is legitimate in comedy. These masses of immigrants are obviously not supposed to acquire full bird status (even if they get wings). They are called "alien settlers" (1307. 1319), and the birds say that very soon their city would be "full of men" (1313), without seeing the rising danger for themselves. Now all people want what was originally just the wish of the two dropouts. The bird utopia degenerates into a fashion. But it is a short-lived fashion, as after the rejection of several intruders (in episodic scenes typical for Old Comedy) the feathers, which obviously have not been used, are just collected again (*ἀπίωμεν ἡμεῖς ξυλλαβόντες τὰ πτερὰ*, 1469).

Finally a delegation of gods arrives whose composition is rather unusual: Poseidon, Heracles and a barbarian god named Triballian. When they find Peisetairos, he is just preparing a roast. Bird slaves, which apparently exist already, bring kitchen utensils, ingredients, and a cheese-grater. Heracles, the famous eater, smells the roast first and asks: "what sort of meat is this?" (1583). Peisetairos replies: "It's a number of birds who have been found guilty of attempting to rebel against the bird democracy" (1583-1585). Peisetairos, who wanted to free the birds and has just made them realise how they are misused by man as merchandise, now himself enjoys eating birds with all culinary delicacy, and this assumes more importance to him than dealing with the delegation of gods. "There's no oil in the flask! And bird-meat certainly should be glistening with fat", he complains and gives a bird cook orders for the preparation of the sauce (1637). So one could aptly say that Peisetairos slaughters the utopia on the pretext of democracy at the moment when he is about to become the only ruler over the city of birds.

Yet, the macabre comes to its extreme when the roast bird is made a wedding meal. Peisetairos goes to Mount Olympus to take Basileia, the epitome of power, from Zeus as his bride. During his absence, the roast is left in Heracles' charge, and one is left to imagine that behind the scenes Heracles delights in roasting the bird meat until the end of the play.

In the foreground, however, corresponding to the conventional end of comedy, bride and bridegroom are praised and wedding celebrated. But the

birds also are praised: ὦ τρισμακάριον πτηνὸν ὀρνίθων γένος (1707), for they are allowed to submit to Peisetairos as their new ruler (τύραννος, 1708). And the chorus of birds indeed regards this as good fortune and honours the majestic ruler, his beautiful bride, and the insignias of his power.

I have pointed to some aspects of this comedy, especially to those which have not enjoyed much attention to date. If the telos of comedy as a genre is laughing, it must be different in this case from what Goethe had in mind, when he wrote on the 24th of June in 1780 to Charlotte von Stein about the *Birds* (though in his adaptation): "I wished you could enjoy platitudes as much as I do; this play would really make you laugh". The character of this comedy is not defined by platitudes, and in the end the laughter gets stuck in the throat.

The *Birds* is not a harmless fairytale or animal comedy, in the first place. And it certainly is not accurate to think that for the Greeks of the fifth century BC nature, including man and animal, formed an integrated whole sanctioned by demons. For this view, the depiction of relations between man, bird and nature in this comedy is far too differentiated and reflective.

Relations between man and bird are characterised by tensions, threats and harm done to each other, which is no less drastic than analogous modern phenomena. Sufferings of birds among men and vice versa is not only a modern experience, but already a main theme in Aristophanes' *Birds*. The menacing atmosphere of bilateral threats leading to horrible visions has barely been recognised in scholarship as an element of this comedy, as it corresponds neither to a harmonious picture of the classical period nor to an understanding of Aristophanic comedy which is generally characterised by witty enjoyment. (According to Hegel, it was not possible to feel really good without Aristophanes.)

However, nor is the political dimension excluded from the play. In the end the original antithesis between Athens and the area of birds has completely disappeared. In the area of birds there are now walls, rules, money, domination, subjugation, capital punishment, manipulation, slaves, and submissiveness to a majestic monarch who rules the world together with a kind of Miss Universe. One could certainly not deny that, in a very subtle way, this is a political comedy.

We must reconsider the comic Old Comedy, if we wish to avoid the mistake of regarding Aristophanes as the clumsy predecessor of the so-called New Comedy, mainly represented by Menander, and thus of European comedy. Jokes of every kind, parody, mockery of politicians and intellectuals, — this all belongs to the features of the comic in Old Comedy. But there is another component which seems rather serious to us and is

repeatedly identified by Aristophanes as τὰ δίκαια λέγειν ("to say what is just"). In his early comedies this can be noticed in every effort to make peace, a subject which was exhausted by the conclusion of the peace treaty of Nicias in 421 BC. As comic reflection of the Athenian expedition to Sicily, the *Birds* creates a vision of leaving Athens for a place that seems to be completely different, but in concrete reality is very similar to human structures of power. However, the subjects that are taken up and incorporated into the comic play are at least as up-to-date as the subject of "peace". That the effect they can have on us is not only moving, but dismaying, I wanted to show.

(Translated from German by Annette Mäurer)