

Peisthetairos, Adventurer in Thrace: A New Reading of Aristophanes' *Birds*



If we read *Birds* without assuming any knowledge of Thucydides' account of the disastrous Sicily expedition (an account which cannot have been available to the Dionysia audience of 414), then the conventional scholarly association between the journey of Peisthetairos / Euelpides and the Athenian campaign in Sicily seems unconvincing. The play would have been understood by its contemporary audience, rather, as a satire on avaricious Athenian politicians' colonial activities around the Thracian-Athenian borders on the northern coast of the Aegean between and beyond Olympus and Chalcidice. Aristophanes himself elsewhere labelled the aristocrats who 'lurked' in that area *Thrakophoitai*. Almost every toponymic reference in *Birds*, for example to Triballia and to Olophyxia near Athos, points in a Balkan direction.

The failure of the Nephelokokkygian citizen enrolment procedure, and Peisthetairos' rejection of all the other appurtenances of Athenian democracy (voting urns etc.), underline that he is a self-aggrandising *turannos*, who is opportunistically subjecting a nation of barbarian tribesmen. The birds are great fighters, but have previously been living in a pre-polis natural world (rather as the Athenians conceived the Thracian native lifestyle). Their previous ruler was the hoopoe Teres, whose name sounds like Tereus, infamous King of Thrace. Like the Athenian parricide, he represents the type of disreputable criminal, who is attracted to these barbarian hinterlands. As the presence of Procne and the thumping references to Sophocles' tragedy *Tereus* remind us, the Hoopoe, Teres/Tereus, is a rapist and a mutilator. He has also committed a crime of kin-cannibalism (which is what the other Birds start doing under Peisthetairos' regime).

Birds is thus the only surviving Greek play set in Thrace except for Euripides' *Hecuba*, which features another unpleasant Thracian ruler, Polymestor. *Birds* is also a rare as a fifth-century text which tells us a great deal about setting up a new colony in barbarian territory. The Birds are treated like slaves, *andrapoda*, as Peisthetairos himself says, and Thrace was of course the place from which the Athenians acquired a large proportion of their slaves. There may even be a more specific reference, in the name of Peisthetairos, to another well-known *Thrakophoitai*, and the lecture concludes by considering several possible identities for his real-life counterpart.



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