

**ESSAY ON "THE
BIRDS" OF
ARISTOPHANES**

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Essay on "The Birds" of Aristophanes by J. W. Süvern

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ESSAY

ON

“THE BIRDS” OF ARISTOPHANES,

BY

J. W. SÜVERN.

TRANSLATED BY

W. R. HAMILTON, F. R. S.

“ ‘The Birds’ is a singular performance, even among the eccentricities of
“ Aristophanes, into which the poet has contrived to weave an innumerable
“ quantity of allusions, quaint fancies, and pleasantries, such as no person but
“ himself, we think, could have furnished. It is, however, amongst the least
“ pleasing of the poet’s performances, because it wants a central object, and
“ notwithstanding what the commentators say about Deceleia, the *scopos*
“ *dramatis* is rather uncertain.”—*Quarterly Review*, March, 1813.

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P R E F A C E.

THIS essay on "the Birds" of Aristophanes was read in the Royal Academy of Sciences at Berlin on the 19th and 26th days of July, 1827, and the contents of it soon became generally known to the literary public in Germany. It was not, however, published in the Transactions of the Society before the appearance of their volume for 1830.

In the interval it had attracted the notice of some of the learned author's contemporaries, and the reader will find his replies to their criticisms in the appendix to this volume.

In laying the translation of the essay before the English public, the translator confines himself to the expression of his own earnest conviction that Professor Süvern has fully and completely succeeded in proving the proposition he has advanced; and he feels confident that, though some minor points may be objected to, this conviction will be felt by all who will take the trouble to read the essay, and to try the truth of its contents by a frequent reference to the play itself, and to the authorities quoted by the writer.*

* Compare also the whole of the third section of the eighteenth chapter of Mitford's History of Greece.

The following table of the most remarkable events connected with classical history, which occurred during the time that Aristophanes was before the Athenian public, as a comic poet, may not be unacceptable to the reader; the details of the table are entirely taken from Clinton's *Fasti Hellenici*.

Supposed age of Aristophanes.	Play exhibited.	Olympiad.	Year, A. C.	Archon at Athens.	Prize obtained by Aristophanes.	Year of the Peloponnesian war.	Public events, &c.
19	Δαιταλιῆς.	88—1	427	Diotimos.	2	5	Re-conquest of Lesbos. Surrender of Plataia. Sedition at Korkyra. Gorgias' first embassy from Leontinoi to Athens.
20	Βαβυλώνιοι. <i>ἰν ᾄσται.</i>	88—2	426	Eukles.		6	Lustration of Delos.
21	Ἰλχαρνηῆς.	88—3	425	Euthydemos.	3	7	Sphakteria occupied and surrendered to Kleon.
22	Ἰππεῖς.	88—4	424	Stratokles.	2	8	Battle of Delion. Amphipolis taken by Brasidas.
23	Νεφέλαι. (α)	89—1	423	Isarchos.	3	9	Banishment of Thucydides. Truce for one year.
24	Σφήκες.	89—2	422	Ameinias.	2	10	Deaths of Kleon and Brasidas. Athenian citizens computed at 20,000.
24	Νεφέλαι. (β) <i>(ἰν ᾄσται.)</i>	89—2	422	Ameinias.		10	Death of Kratinos.
25	Εἰρήνη.	89—3	421	Alkaios.		11	Truce for 50 years.
26		89—4	420			12	Treaty with Argos.
			418			14	Alcibiades commands an Athenian expedition into the Peloponnesus.
			416			16	Surrender of Melos.
			415			17	Expedition sails to Sicily.

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32	Ἀμφιάραος.	91—2	414	Chabrias.	2	18	Second campaign in Sicily.	
32	Ὅρνιθες, κατ' ἄστυ. Γέωργοι ?	91—2	414	Chabrias.	2	18		
35	Λυσιστράτη.	92—1	411	Kallias.		21	Government of the 400.	
35	Θεσμοφοριαζούσαι.	92—1	411	Kallias.		21	Termination of the History of Thucydides.	
38	Πλοῦτος. (α)	92—4	408	Diokles.			Alcibiades takes Byzantium.	
41	Βάτραχοι.		406				Death of Euripides	
		93—3	405	Kallias.			Death of Sophokles.	
			404	Pythodoros.			Battle of Aigospotamoi.	
			403	Eukleides.			Athens taken by Ly sandros. Death of Alcibiades.	
			401	Xenainetos.			Thrasyboulos drives out the 30 tyrants.	
54	Ἐκκλησιάζουσαι.	96—4	399	Aristokrates.			Retreat of the 10,000.	
			392	Demostratos.			Death of Socrates.	
							The Lacedaemonians invade Corinth under command of Agesilaos.	
60	Πλοῦτος. (β) The Κώκυλος and the Ἰσιολοσίεων were exhibited about this time under the name of Araros, son of Aristophanes.	97—4	388	Antipatros.			Chabrias sails for Kypros to assist Euagoras.	
			98—1	387	Theodotos.			Peace of Antalkidas.
			98—4	384	Diotrephes.			Birth of Aristotle.
			99—2	382	Euandros.			First campaign of Olynthian war.
			105—1	359	Kallimedes.			Birth of Demosthenes. Accession of Philip.

THE ARGUMENT

OF

“ THE BIRDS ” OF ARISTOPHANES.

Two Athenians come upon the stage, each with a bird on his shoulder; they are disgusted with the vices and follies of their own country, and are in search of another. The oracle has told them that these birds, a crow and a jackdaw, will be their best guides to Tereus, who was once King of Thrace, and having married Progne, daughter of Pandion, King of Athens, was, according to the well known story, changed into a Hoopoe for his cruelty to his wife, and to her sister Philomela.

The principal of these Athenians is called Peisthetairos, his companion, Euelpides.

Having reached the abode of Tereus, or the Hoopoe, (Epos) Peisthetairos, having opened his views to him, and gained his good will, proposes to him a scheme by which the birds may resume that dominion over the world which belonged to them before the existence of the gods. Epos is pleased with the project, and summons an assembly of the birds that it may be laid before them.

The birds enter, and a selection of them form the chorus of the play.

They at first are very indignant at men, their natural enemies, having been admitted amongst them, but are soon soothed by the flattering expressions of Peisthetairos, and the ambitious views he opens to them.

He now lays before them the details of the scheme, the advantages they will derive from it, and how easy it will be for them to starve the gods, unless they come into their terms.

The birds address the spectators on the prospect opened for the resumption of their old dominion, and on the increased happiness which would accrue to mankind, if they would reject the supremacy of the gods.

Peisthetairos and Euelpides having left the stage for a time, return disguised as birds.

A consultation is held between them and Epops as to the naming of the new city of the birds, which they agree shall be called Nephelokokkygia, on the patron deity of it, and on the possession of the *πελαργυῶν*, or citadel.

These points being settled, Peisthetairos gives direction to the birds, how they are to proceed in the building of the city; and he sends for a priest for the performance of the necessary sacrifices.

Whilst this is going on, a poet comes in to celebrate the magnificence of the city, and the glory of the founder. He is contemptuously dismissed with a cloak and tunic to cover his rags.

A soothsayer succeeds him, with prophecies, but is ill-treated by Peisthetairos: as are successively a surveyor, who wants to measure and lay out the new streets, an *Ἐπίσκοπος*, or inspector, to see that all is in proper order, and a venter or promulgator of decrees, to give them a code of laws.

The birds again chaunt the glories of their new existence, and the good they will do to mankind.

On the return of Peisthetairos to the stage, which he had left to look after the sacrifices, a herald announces to him that the city is built, and describes how the birds had brought it about. Another brings the news that a messenger from the gods had been seen flying through the city, which turns out to be Iris sent by Jupiter to mankind to bid them not leave off their sacrifices. She is taken by a party of birds sent in pursuit of her, and brought on the stage.

Iris denounces the vengeance of Jupiter on Peisthetairos.

Peisthetairos, when he had ordered the city to be built, had sent a herald to the men to bid them no longer sacrifice to the gods.

The herald being returned, compliments him, and having enumerated the changes which had taken place among mankind since the new order of things, he tells him that several persons are coming from the men to be fledged, or plumed.

Immediately a great basket of wings of various sorts of birds is prepared for the different characters.

The first who makes his appearance is a parricide, who observes that birds kill their parents; but Peisthetairos prevails

on him to take a cock's wings, &c. &c. and go and fight the battles of his country in Thrace.

He is followed by a dithyrambic poet, who wishes to become a nightingale, and gives specimens of bombastic poetry.

A sycophant requests to be supplied with wings to enable him to fly to and fro' between the islands and Athens, and thus lay his informations against the rich with impunity.

Peisthetairos, indignant at the evil purposes to which the wings are to be put, refuses them, and will receive no more applications.

After some choral songs allusive to the preceding scene, Prometheus comes slinking in under an umbrella, to avoid being seen by Jupiter, and tells Peisthetairos that it is all over with the gods, that they are nearly starved to death, and that Jupiter has sent ambassadors to him to treat for terms; but he recommends him, on his old friendship for mankind, not to treat but on condition that the sceptre of dominion be given up to the birds, and that Jupiter give to him (Peisthetairos) his daughter Basileia in marriage.

The three ambassadors make their appearance: Neptune, Hercules, and Triballos.

Peisthetairos knowing the good appetite of Hercules immediately prepares a dinner, and the prospect of it soon induces the ambassador to come into his terms. Triballos, who seems to know nothing at all about the business, sides with him, and Neptune, who had opposed both the demands, seeing himself outvoted, at length gives in.

Hercules invites Peisthetairos to go with them to Jupiter to receive his bride.

A choral interlude follows allusive to gluttony and the art of cheating.

A messenger enters descanting upon the splendour with which Peisthetairos is approaching on his car, accompanied by his bride Basileia.

The bride and bridegroom make their appearance, and are greeted by the nuptial songs and dances of the choros.