

“Caught in the Act”
by
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Written in 414 B.C.E. *The Birds* by Aristophanes was written as a comedy that criticized Athenian politics and challenged citizens to be aware of the true nature of their rulers. While much of the play is a character study of an autocratic ruler, it also presents an example of the political situation in Greece in allegorical form. This is more than an entertaining comedy; there are striking parallels between this moment in Ancient Greek society and the characters, strategies and plotlines of *The Birds*. The play has remained relevant, and we will be emphasizing these same parallels with the chaotic presidency of Donald Trump in the United States. *The Birds* is a study in the pitfalls of democracy, and we see Athenian and contemporary mistakes mirrored in the play such as the rise of demagogues and damaging exclusivity.

The Birds begins with Pisthetaerus and Euelipides leaving Athens in search of a new homeland. Their criterion is not peace, but the ability to do as they like and not be burdened by rules and government. Soon, they stumble upon the home of Tereus, turned bird by the gods after he set off a series of killings. Pisthetaerus presents a plan to create a utopia where the birds may once again rule the world. As soon as the bird society agrees to his plan, Pisthetaerus promptly takes up the position of an autocratic ruler, using brute force to keep peace. After building up the city's defenses, he offers to negotiate with the gods if they present the sceptre of power back to the birds and give him the Princess in marriage.

Within the years between 500-400 B.C.E. democracy had been introduced as a ruling system in Athens. As the city developed into a powerful city-state, it began to exert more power on the surrounding nations and geographical landmarks. In search of power over the seas, the Athenians were embroiled in the Peloponnesian War with the Spartans, and the play was written a few years before the fateful Peace of Nicias fell apart. In the midst of these struggles, Athens

abandoned its agricultural Attica, and engaged in the Siege of Melos. While these events occurred, the Athenians waited for news of the Sicilian expedition that ended with a resounding defeat and the defection of Alcibiades, one of the main generals, to Sparta. We can clearly see Aristophanes' criticisms of these historical occurrences in his comedy.

Our director's concept is to present *The Birds* as a political satire on the presidency of Donald Trump. The corruption of Pisthetaerus and the Ancient Greek principles backing his rule dovetail incredibly well with the decision making of the current president. While the absurdity of the play may distract from the biting critique, President Trump is already a larger-than-life buffoon, and understanding the historical parallels between Aristophanes' writing and the current state of democracy in America will be stunningly disturbing to audiences.

First, we must discuss the celebrated democracy of Athens that inspired the spread of republics across Europe and North America during the Enlightenment hundreds of years later. In Ancient Greece, while only the free men had a say in politics, it was a direct democracy with each man having one vote. However, a democracy does not always mean freedom. Indeed, as Leach writes, "...[T]he policy of fostering the supremacy of the people led, as it always does lead, to the rise of demagogues..." (366). This inevitable development from democracy to demagogue influenced Athens' desire for more land and the city-state's move toward imperialism. Pericles became one of these demagogues, leading Athens in the Peloponnesian War according to his strategy that willingly sacrificed Attica and its residents to the cause, forcing them to relocate into the city proper.

It is in this atmosphere that Pisthetaerus and Euelpides set off to find a more peaceful city to pass their final years in glorious carnality. However much they think they desire to find

unruled freedom, they cannot escape the destructive tendencies embedded in their very natures as human beings. Arrowsmith describes the inevitability of human nature, "...[T]hey take with them what they are unaware of, the corrosive, ineradicable strain of a national--and, for Aristophanes, I believe, a genetically human--character," (126). Immediately, Pisthetaerus displays his default psyche by abandoning his carnality in order to fulfill his insatiable greed for power. After winning over Tereus to his plan, the elderly Athenian must convince the birds to follow his advice, whispering to Euelpides, "No, no, it's just that for quite some time I've been trying to put something into words, a big juicy utterance that will shatter these birds to the very soul. (to the birds) So sorrowful am I on your account, who once were kings-- ... Yes you, kings of all that exists," (Aristophanes, 81). Appealing to their baser desires of power, Pisthetaerus, using a formula of truth, invents a story of abused and forgotten birds. As Habib writes, "...he [Pisthetaerus] promulgates a myth about the birds' origins, designed to appeal to their pride and sense of justice," (16). Apparently fleeing from the smooth-talking leaders of Athens, Pisthetaerus promptly becomes his own worst enemy when it best serves his ambitions. Offering the birds the freedom of a democracy, he sees it as an opening for universal power.

This democratic spawning of arbitrary demagogues was repeated in 2016 with the emergence of Donald Trump as the winning candidate in the U.S. general elections. In order to gain the support of the working class populace, he manufactured a powerless situation, using facts to invent a narrative that placed him in a heroic position. Hahl, et al. describe the conditions for the emergence of a demagogue, "In the context of a legitimacy crisis, aggrieved voters are motivated to interpret the act of lying demagoguery as a symbolic challenge to the seemingly illegitimate establishment," (18). Trump riled up the workers by using shreds of fact to prove

that their power had been removed and that he could return them to their rightful place. On the campaign trail, he repeatedly promised a return of power with his slogan “Make America Great Again.” At a Michigan rally, now President Trump proclaimed, “It’s going to be a victory for the people, a victory for the wage-earner, the factory worker. A victory for every citizen and for all of the people whose voices have not been heard for many, many years,” (Lamont et al., 16). He followed in the footsteps of Pisthetaerus who used mythical to render the birds powerless, then promise their triumphant return through his demagoguery.

In President Trump’s 2016 inaugural speech, he proclaimed, “Together, we will make America strong again... And yes, together we will make America great again,” (Trump). Lamont et al. describe this rhetoric in terms of superiority, “Trump...transformed existing symbolic boundaries by legitimizing the view that workers had of their superior position in American society,” (32-33). President Trump confirmed the disenfranchised working-class, promising them America would return as the industrial giant of the world just as Pisthetaerus pandered to the birds’ disadvantaged position, offering more power than they could have ever dreamed.

Rapidly capitulating to Pisthetaerus’ speech, the birds become his willing subjects, and the Athenian’s desires expand into the imperialistic drive of his home city. When *The Birds* was first performed, Athens had just sent off the doomed Sicilian Expedition in search of power over the seas. In reference to this, Pisthetaerus drives the newly formed Cloudcuckooland to gain power over the air, an imperialistic move not unlike the ever-unsatisfied Athens. As the new ruler begins to construct his offensive plan, he shows a ruthlessness hidden by his convincing words. First, Euelpides disappears, ordered to help build the wall, never to return. This neatly disposes of the only person who knows who Pisthetaerus truly is. Tereus also falls from view

after giving the two foreigners wings. The rest of the population is completely lulled by the vision of a shimmering utopia and all the power they could wish for. At the end of the play, we see an even further disregard for those who helped him reach the powerful position he now claims, when he informs Heracles he is cooking, “Some birds who’ve been convicted of attempted rebellion against the bird democracy,” (Aristophanes, 229). Pisthetaerus willingly sacrifices his submissive subjects to display his ruthless power to the gods he wishes to bargain with.

These actions indicate that Aristophanes was making a political statement as to the injurious power wielded by Athens against Attica and Melos. According to Arrowsmith, the Attican abandonment was absolute treachery, “...Attica herself--the country-world of which Athens herself was originally only the town-expression--was to be systematically written off, abandoned to the enemy,” (120) all for a better chance at winning the Peloponnesian War. Not only that, but Arrowsmith points out that this decision severed Athens from the wisdom of the earth and its past (120). Athenian government and military were interwoven, meaning justice was nonexistent. Pisthetaerus shows a similar flippancy to any wisdom but his own, sending away all those with an outsider perspective and erecting a wall to ensure his complete power over who is allowed to enter.

Once again, the similarities with the President Trump presidency cannot be ignored. After promising the restoration of the working class, he turned on them, sacrificing them to his ultimate desire of power mongering to the Chinese, Russians, and the entire world. While tariffs are damaging American businesses and employment rates, they are a small price to pay for fulfilling the desire for power. And like Euelipides, those who made the mistake of aligning

themselves with the President, like Kellyanne Conway, have fallen to their demise, welcome offerings to the gods of desire and power. Statistically, President Trump's presidential staff had the highest turnover of any administration during the first term, losing fifty-eight members to resignation or forced retirement (Lu and Yourish). Unlike Pisthetaerus, President Trump is saddled by what remains of American democracy, but like Athens, he has created a complicit government that allows him to enact his desires. President Trump, Athens and Pisthetaerus exemplify the destruction that results from complete control borne out of demagoguery.

As a final comparison, Katz describes how a shoddy envoy of three Athenians--Nicias, Alcibiades, and Lamachus--led the soon failed Sicilian Expedition. This trio strongly resembles the group of gods sent to make peace with Pisthetaerus and Cloudcuckooland. In the case of Alcibiades, he was known to have a lisp and to wear his robe at an unusual length (Katz; 355, 357). This is mirrored by Triballian in both his speech, "No hittum hide wit bat," (Aristophanes, 235) and in Poseidon's comment, "Here, what do you think you're doing, draping your cloak like that, from right to left?" (Aristophanes, 227). As the level-headed leader, Nicias advocated against the expedition, and Poseidon embodies this cautious characteristic. For example, when Heracles wanted to strangle Pisthetaerus, Poseidon interjected, "Listen, colleague, our charge is to discuss a settlement," (Aristophanes, 227). However, like Nicias, the god was outvoted in the final decision (Katz, 355). Heracles' impulse of strangle reflects the militaristic nature of Lamachus (Katz, 362). Further, Lamachus was a poor penny pincher always interested in a free meal, and it is interesting to consider Heracles' intense interest in the meal Pisthetaerus is preparing, "And what sort of meat is that?" (Aristophanes, 229) he asks, and later being in mortal fear of losing his inheritance, "You mean I have no share in my father's property?"

(Aristophanes, 239). In these character-based similarities, we can see Aristophanes critique the Athenian leadership of the failed Sicilian Expedition.

However, the headlong reach for power does not rest. In the bird world, Pisthetaerus cannot be content with his conquests over the birds and the air: “[He] soon discovers that secular power is not sufficient...he effectively becomes both the church and state,” (Habib, 38). In the script, Pisthetaerus chases away the priest about to perform the sacrificial ceremony necessary to form a new city claiming the priest was welcoming too many birds to his private abode, “Stop, damn you, stop your invitations! ...Get out of here...I’ll perform this sacrifice all by myself,” (Aristophanes, 139). With this banishment, Pisthetaerus lays claim to the religious power of the city. When absolute power is willingly given to demagogues, their increasing greed can quickly lead to a dictatorship.

This is a shared sentiment with the Greeks, who while they had many gods, attempted to rest in their own power. The parallel can also be seen with the above discussed Sicilian Expedition which was staunchly opposed by the Athenian priests. In a similar move to the disregard of Pisthetaerus, Alcibiades neglected the religious advice and championed the Expedition, “...as a man who had little use for conventional religious beliefs and practices,” (Katz, 378). When a democracy trusts the leadership of a demagogue, their power often leads them to silence the wisdom of a higher power. Once again, the action of Pisthetaerus seem to be constructed out of the political events in Athens.

President Trump again conceptually fits into the engineering of religion to achieve personal gains. While not completely disregarding the Christian church, he has commandeered their typically conservative motives to support his questionable actions no matter how many

court cases are brought against his character. Indeed, some evangelical Christians believe him to be God's chosen leader, as Sarah Huckabee Sanders stated, "I think that He [God] wanted Donald Trump to become president" ("God and Trump"). However, his morals both undermine and redefine the beliefs of religious leaders and institutions. Like Pisthetaerus, he fulfills the apparent duties, while doing away with those who question his leadership.

Finally, according to Euelpides, another reason the two men left their home was because of uncertifiable Athenians being welcomed into the democracy. Even though Pisthetaerus himself was welcomed as a stranger into the birds' city, when he comes to power, he religiously bans all newcomers. He goes so far as to build a wall capable of barring entrance to the gods and any who would hope to immigrate. When the First Messenger announces the completion of the wall, it is the first time Pisthetaerus is called by the name of ruler (Chepel, 9), "Where's Pisthetaerus, the ruler? ... Your wall is all built," (Aristophanes, 171). The wall seals his position as demagogue and dictator.

In our director's concept of comparing Pisthetaerus to President Trump, this final comparison is a warning to the American people. We will emphasize the idea of a wall solidifying the complete power of an originally democratic leader. This threat is disturbing because of the very nearness of its realization. President Trump wants a wall to keep out those who may threaten the delicate balance that keeps him in power. He knows the psychological impact of a concrete divider between nations and the message it will send to the world.

While *The Birds* is an absurd comedy, it is painfully funny to both past and present audiences. Aristophanes wrote the play to make people laugh, but more importantly, he pointed out the political and cultural failures of the Athenians as they pursued an imperialist agenda with

no regard for cultural values or those who may suffer because of it. Pishetaerus is the perfect image of a dictator demagogue, and while we laugh at him, we are also afraid of what this commentary may mean for a future dominated by the power of President Donald Trump and the threat of his wall.

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