

Excerpt terms and conditions



This excerpt is available to assist you in the play selection process.

You may view, print and download any of our excerpts for perusal purposes.

Excerpts are not intended for performance, classroom or other academic use. In any of these cases you will need to purchase playbooks via our website or by phone, fax or mail.

A short excerpt is not always indicative of the entire work, and we strongly suggest reading the whole play before planning a production or ordering a cast quantity.

Dramatic Publishing

THE BIRDS

A Full-Length Play by
Aristophanes
arranged for the stage
by WALTER KERR



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

*** NOTICE ***

The amateur and stock acting rights to this work are controlled exclusively by THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY without whose permission in writing no performance of it may be given. Royalty fees are given in our current catalogue and are subject to change without notice. Royalty must be paid every time a play is performed whether or not it is presented for profit and whether or not admission is charged. A play is performed anytime it is acted before an audience. All inquiries concerning amateur and stock rights should be addressed to:

DRAMATIC PUBLISHING

P. O. Box 129, Woodstock, Illinois 60098.

COPYRIGHT LAW GIVES THE AUTHOR OR THE AUTHOR'S AGENT THE EXCLUSIVE RIGHT TO MAKE COPIES. This law provides authors with a fair return for their creative efforts. Authors earn their living from the royalties they receive from book sales and from the performance of their work. Conscientious observance of copyright law is not only ethical, it encourages authors to continue their creative work. This work is fully protected by copyright. No alterations, deletions or substitutions may be made in the work without the prior written consent of the publisher. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, videotape, film, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. It may not be performed either by professionals or amateurs without payment of royalty. All rights, including but not limited to the professional, motion picture, radio, television, videotape, foreign language, tabloid, recitation, lecturing, publication, and reading are reserved. *On all programs this notice should appear:*

“Produced by special arrangement with
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY of Woodstock, Illinois”

©MCMCLII by
THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICAN PRESS
©Renewed MCMLXXX by
WALTER KERR

Printed in the United States of America
All Rights Reserved
(THE BIRDS)

Library of Congress Catalog Card No.: A52-8016

ISBN 0-87129-496-6

THE BIRDS

A Full-length Play for
a Flexible Cast

CHARACTERS

PITHETAERUS THE FOOTLOOSE, a crappel
EUELPIDES THE FOOTSORE, a fearling
TROCHILUS, the Butler Bird
EPOPS, King of the Birds
PROCNE THE NIGHTINGALE, wife to Epop
LEADER OF THE CHORUS
PRIEST-BIRD
POET
PROPHET
REAL ESTATE MAN
INSPECTOR
LAWYER
FIRST MESSENGER
SECOND MESSENGER
IRIS THE SWIFT, a small-time Goddess
HERALD
PROMPTER, offstage voice
PROMETHEUS
HERCULES
BARBARIAN GOD
NEPTUNE
CHORUS of BIRDS

TIME: About 414 B.C.

PLACE: A rugged mountain-top, some distance from Athens.

polytheistic absurdities to which Athenian religion had been reduced.

This acting version was first presented at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., in 1948.

W.K.

PRODUCTION NOTES

*(Page 39) Though this business was not used in the original production, the real estate man may have a fleet of assistants who immediately begin to tape and mark out the space on stage, planting signs reading "Lot One," "Lot Two," "Dead End" - at a high peak - and so on.

** (Page 70) In the original production, these two were blocked out for a moment during the processional and a dummy, identically dressed, was substituted for Iris, so that on the last line, Pithetaerus could mightily seem to hoist Iris by one hand over his head and carry her off. Where this business is impractical, it is possible to extend the earlier business of his trying to pick her up, whereupon an escort of Birds takes over for him, raising her up and bearing her off as though on a litter, with PITHETAERUS following in state.

THE SETTING: Limitless sky in the background. The rock formations should afford six or seven varied entrances, at different heights, with stair-like formations to connect the acting levels. At one side a little bridge between two pinnacles. A high point of the stage at DR is so arranged as to be useful to Pithetaerus as a sort of pulpit.

Various gnarled and barren trees, especially on the upper reaches of the stage, including one tree which is practical for a perch and may occasionally be used by one of the Birds.

At DL, there is a gap in the rock formation which seems to lead downward and which is used for any ascent from the earth.

In a crevice somewhere upstage is concealed Procne's nest, if possible behind a movable scrim which is identical with the other rock surfaces when not lighted from within.

The small birds carried by Pithetaerus and Euelpides are so constructed as to fit over one arm, like a sleeve. Their heads can then be manipulated by the actors' fingers.

CHARACTER NOTES: (POET) is dressed in rags, with long, flowing hair. (IRIS) has a Brooklyn accent.

ACT ONE

SCENE: PITHETAERUS and EUELPIDES appear DL, as though climbing from the earth below. PITHETAERUS carries a crow in his arms, EUELPIDES a jay. Both are exhausted from the long climb. Before they can relax, however, Euelpides' jay begins pecking its head vigorously toward C.

EUELPIDES (*listening to his jay*). Straight ahead, you say? To the tree over there? (*The jay nods excitedly and EUELPIDES starts C. As PITHETAERUS follows him, his own crow begins wagging its head violently in another direction.*)

PITHETAERUS. Oh, this damn pigeon! (*To the bird.*) What do you say now? Go two miles back? (*PITHETAERUS howls with disgust and collapses on a rock, near L. EUELPIDES comes to him, shaking his finger at the crow.*)

EUELPIDES. Listen, bird. You're supposed to be guiding us. But all we do is go backwards and sideways. We haven't got that kind of time. (*The crow bites his shaking finger and he leaps away, nursing it.*)

PITHETAERUS. To think that I - a mature man! - should travel a hundred miles with a bird giving me directions! (*His crow sets up a violent jerking and EUELPIDES comes in warily to listen.*)

EUELPIDES (*interpreting*). He says it isn't far as the crow flies. (*PITHETAERUS looks at the crow in disgust, begins slapping its head vigorously; the crow bites him. EUELPIDES, surveying the rocky terrain.*) Personally, I'm worn down to my toenails.

PITHETAERUS. If I only knew where we were--

EUELPIDES (*wistfully*). Suppose we could ever find our way home again?

PITHETAERUS. No.

EUELPIDES. Oh, dear.

PITHETAERUS (*sudden renewal of determination*). And if I could I wouldn't want to!

EUELPIDES. Oh, dear.

PITHETAERUS (*on his feet again, looking around*). I wonder what road this is.

EUELPIDES. Oh, dear. (*Helpfully.*) It's the Oh Dear Road. (*PITHETAERUS swats him one, he dodges; he then takes it out on his jay, swatting the bird as he continues.*) A lot of good you are! (*Calling to PITHETAERUS, who is wandering about the stage.*) I told you we couldn't trust that bird-seller. Telling us these fellows would just naturally lead us to the King of the Birds! (*Sits down, C, despondently.*) I don't think they ever heard of the King of the Birds. And if they did, I'll bet they're disloyal. (*Jay opens his mouth.*) Don't open your face like that! You look anything but attractive. (*Jay's head begins jutting toward R.*) Where? Where? Over there? (*His eyes glued to the jay, he quickly rises and moves in the indicated direction.*) All right. All right. I'm going. Keep showing me. (*He walks smack into a wall of rock, rebounds, turns on the jay.*) That's rock! Oh, you knew that! That's what you had in mind! (*Begins to throttle his jay. PITHETAERUS, who has been wandering UC, peering off at the highest point of the rocks with his back to us, now seems to be engaged in some excitement with his bird.*) Find something? What's your bird doing?

PITHETAERUS (*in a rage*). Biting my damn fingers off!

EUELPIDES. Any road up there?

PITHETAERUS. Nothing. No road anywhere.

EUELPIDES. Oh, dear. I haven't got a nerve left. I've used up every single nerve trying to go to the birds, and now they're all gone. (*He shudders violently.*) See? (*Turns to the audience, comes down toward them.*) I suppose you wonder what we're doing here? I wonder, too. (*Keeping up a direct conversation with the audience, he now goes to L where they have entered, and hauls over a couple of heavy sacks filled with equipment. He drags these across stage, with great effort, and deposits them at extreme DR, meanwhile continuing the conversation.*) You probably think we're crazy. We are. We come of very good families. Legitimate. We were very respected people back home. Athens. Very fine city. You probably think we were

thrown out. (*Shakes his head.*) Just got up and left. Walked out. Still walking. We don't hate Athens. Fine city. Rich, too. Everybody equal. Every man has absolute freedom to pay taxes. Every man has a constitutional right to ruin himself. (*These are read as though they were virtues; now his face falls.*) Of course, the town's full of lawyers. Always suing everybody. Government men, too. And inspectors. Always inspectors! (*PITHETAERUS has momentarily abandoned his search above to listen to these last remarks; now he adds his own complaints, coming down to EUELPIDES and sitting down while EUELPIDES continues doing all the work.*)

PITHETAERUS. Tell 'em about the real estate. Tell 'em about the long-haired poets!

EUELPIDES. He's right. The city's infested. A lot of prophets, too. Always predicting what's going to happen the day after tomorrow. Very wearing.

PITHETAERUS. Bores, bores, bores!

EUELPIDES. That's why we left.

PITHETAERUS. Get away from the bores, get a little peace!

EUELPIDES. That's why we're looking for the King of the Birds. (*His work finished, coming down to the audience again.*) If anybody should know of a nice quiet place where a couple of men could settle - with no bores - it should be the King of the Birds. Birds get around. (*PITHETAERUS suddenly jumps up, attending to his crow.*)

PITHETAERUS. My bird's doing something!

EUELPIDES. I'll bet I know what.

PITHETAERUS (*excited, moving anxiously wherever the bird indicates, but never more than a few steps in any one direction.*)
No... no, watch!

EUELPIDES (*indifferently and sadly, to the audience, playing against Pithetaerus' excitement.*) So we started off with a stew-pot, a knife and fork - a few myrtle berries - and, now you know.

PITHETAERUS. Here! Look!

EUELPIDES (*to his jay, laconically.*) Has that other bird really got anything? (*The jay shakes its head slowly, with contempt.*)

PITHETAERUS. It's behaving like there were other birds around somewhere! (*Now Euelpides' bird becomes agitated.*)

EUELPIDES. Mine's doing it, too! Where? Where? (*He runs agitatedly wherever his bird indicates, so that both PITHETAERUS and EUELPIDES are scurrying hither and thither independently. Suddenly they cross each other unexpectedly, so that EUELPIDES gives a little scream of fright, then calms down as he sees it is PITHETAERUS.*) Oh, it's you.

PITHETAERUS. Yes, dammit, it's me! Look for some birds!

EUELPIDES. Maybe we could scare them up if we made some noise.

PITHETAERUS (*indicating rock RC*). That's right. Here... kick your leg against that rock.

EUELPIDES (*responds automatically, about to do it, then considers*). Wouldn't it be louder if we used your head?

PITHETAERUS (*roaring*). Kick your leg against that rock!

EUELPIDES (*resignedly*). All right. (*Braces himself and does it; lets out a great series of yowls.*)

PITHETAERUS (*listening to the yowls with approval*). That's fine. That ought to do it. (*Motioning EUELPIDES to join him.*) Ready, now. They'll be coming.

(Together they move warily, expectantly, among the rocks UR. Coming on from UL, we see TROCHILUS, the Butler Bird, entering matter-of-factly, nose in air. He turns around a rock unexpectedly and comes face to face with PITHETAERUS and EUELPIDES. ALL leap into the air in terror of each other, screaming and chattering, and dive for hiding places. PITHETAERUS and EUELPIDES hide in the rock formation at R, TROCHILUS high on the rock formation at L.)

EUELPIDES. Mercy have Apollo. I mean, Apollo have mercy. (*His teeth chatter.*)

PITHETAERUS (*peeping over a ledge, trembling*). What a beak!

TROCHILUS (*waveringly, from his hiding place*). Men! Bird-catchers!

PITHETAERUS (*trying to get up nerve, his voice faltering*). H-ho there! D-d-don't be frightened of us!

TROCHILUS (*adopting the same bravura, calling across*). F-f-frightened of you? F-f-frightened of men? (*Bats his wings at them.*) Y-y-you're done for!

EUELPIDES (*helpfully*). Oh... we're not men! (*To himself.*) No. Never say that.

TROCHILUS (*relaxing*). You're not? What are you, then?

EUELPIDES (*indicating PITHETAERUS*). Well, I don't know about him, but I'm a bird. An African bird. The... the Fearling.

TROCHILUS. Never heard of him. (*Becoming braver, taking command.*) And what kind of a bird is that bird? Huh?

PITHETAERUS (*half-rising from behind ledge*). Why, I'm a... (*Pauses to consider, then with some self-disgust.*) ...a Crapple, if you must know.

EUELPIDES. One of the yellow-bellied school.

PITHETAERUS (*regaining confidence*). Now, see here. You're a bit of a fright yourself. What are you?

TROCHILUS (*coming down the rock, manservant style*). I am a butler bird. Butler to Epops, King of the Birds.

EUELPIDES (*excited*). He's our man! (*Trochilus' head whips around, alert.*) I mean, bird.

TROCHILUS. Choose your language.

PITHETAERUS (*tentatively coming down from the rock formation*). Would you... do us the kindness to call your master?

TROCHILUS. I'm sorry. He has just fallen asleep after a dainty supper of berries, and a few choice grubs. I picked the grubs myself.

EUELPIDES (*relaxed now, assuming an air*). Wake him up. Tell him we're here.

TROCHILUS. He will be angry.

PITHETAERUS (*taking a deep breath*). We'll risk it.

TROCHILUS. Very well. (*Starts to go; L above, pauses to check.*) The Fearling, and the...

PITHETAERUS (*obligingly*). Crapple.

TROCHILUS. Crapple. I think I understand. (*TROCHILUS goes, UL. PITHETAERUS and EUELPIDES follow him a step or two, completely off the rock formation; then PITHETAERUS turns on EUELPIDES and kicks him to DR.*)

PITHETAERUS. You mouse! You flyspeck! What were you so frightened about? You were so frightened you made me frightened. What was the matter with you?

EUELPIDES. I was frightened.

PITHETAERUS. Where's your jay? You were so frightened,
you big coward, you let your jay go!

EUELPIDES. Where's your crow?

PITHETAERUS (*realizing he no longer has his crow*). I gave
him his freedom.

EUELPIDES. That was decent of you.

(There is a sudden loud whirr and EPOPS rises to the top of a rock at the highest stage point, UC. PITHETAERUS and EUELPIDES realize that something has happened. Slowly they turn to face EPOPS, above. When they have finally turned full face to him, they collapse in a trembling heap together, and scurry on hands and knees for the shelter of a DR rock.)

EPOPS (*in a great voice*). Who wants me?

EUELPIDES (*terrified, trying to laugh it off*). I can't imagine.

(To PITHETAERUS.) Did you see anybody?

EPOPS. Does someone dare to laugh at the King of the Birds?

EUELPIDES. No... no... just a little giddy... *(Shoving PITHETAERUS, as though to start him running out of this place.)*

Giddyap. *(PITHETAERUS collapses into Euelpides' arms; EUELPIDES is struggling to hold him up during the ensuing conversation.)*

EPOPS. You must know, strangers, that I once was a man.

EUELPIDES (*looking down at PITHETAERUS*). We all were.

EPOPS. Born of woman, married to a wife, I was unfaithful to my dear Procne. Now I am changed by Apollo into a bird, and Procne is the nightingale, and I am faithful at last.

EUELPIDES (*to the audience*). We're certainly getting the exposition out.

EPOPS. Who are you?

EUELPIDES. Mortals. Haven't had any affairs with nightingales.

EPOPS. From what country?

EUELPIDES. The land of democracy, where everyone is equal.

EPOPS (*suddenly suspicious*). You're not government men?

EUELPIDES. Anti-government men.

EPOPS (*relaxing, moving gracefully across bridge at L so that he can see them better from across the stage*). They're getting around to that, are they?

EUELPIDES. Not fast enough. That's why we came.

EPOPS. Why have you come? (*PITHETAERUS, in Euelpides' arms, begins to stir.*)

PITHETAERUS. What? What?

EUELPIDES. He wants to know why we came.

PITHETAERUS. Tell him.

EUELPIDES. If you can lie down somewhere else, I will.
(*Drops PITHETAERUS with a thud and goes to C, speaking up to EPOPS on the bridge at mid-L. PITHETAERUS crawls to a small rock and sits down.*) We came to see you.

EPOPS. Why me?

EUELPIDES (*taking on graces and airs, in the manner of a rather florid ambassador*). Because formerly you were a man, as we are. Formerly you had debts, as we do. And formerly you did not want to pay them, as we don't. Furthermore, now that you're a bird, you must have flown everywhere. And while you were flying all over the world, you must have seen - somewhere - some little town, where a man can sit back, stretch out, drop a berry into his mouth... (*Pantomimes what he describes.*)

PITHETAERUS (*chiming in*). ...and not be bothered with bores!

EPOPS. Are you looking for a city greater than your own?

EUELPIDES. No, not a greater one. Just one more pleasant to live in.

PITHETAERUS (*nodding*). No bores.

EPOPS. What sort of city would please you?

EUELPIDES. I'll tell you. A city where the following would be the most important business transacted: Some friend would come banging on your door at a reasonable hour in the morning, and say: (*Dramatizing, in a harsh voice.*) "Get up! Get your wife and children! Get over to my house. Sit down at my table and eat till you bust. And if you don't, I'll be mad at you!" I have something like that in mind.

EPOPS. I see. Sort of... roughing it?

EUELPIDES. Yes.

EPOPS (*to PITHETAERUS*). And you?

PITHETAERUS. My tastes are similar.

EPOPS. I see. As a matter of fact, there is a city like that. It's on the Red Sea.

PITHETAERUS (*rising, asserting himself now*). No, no! No sea ports. Let a ship dock, and there'll be a process server on it. Someplace remote. Uninhabited. Inaccessible. (*Has been envisioning such a place as he speaks; suddenly there is a gleam in his eye.*) Wait a minute. Now, wait a minute!

EUELPIDES (*resignedly*). You have an idea.

PITHETAERUS. Yes!

EUELPIDES. The last idea you had was using birds for guides. I hate to bring it up.

PITHETAERUS (*excited*). No, listen, now. Listen! (*Grabs EUELPIDES by the shoulders and sits him down between himself and EPOPS, who moves slightly down on his rock perch.*)

EUELPIDES. It isn't as though I had a choice. (*To the audience.*) You do. You can go home anytime.

PITHETAERUS (*striding around, his eyes ablaze as he works out his plan*). Sh-h-h-h!

EUELPIDES (*relaying it unnecessarily to the audience*). Sh-h-h-h!

PITHETAERUS (*ready to talk now, becoming momentarily confidential with EPOPS*). Tell me. What is it like to live with the birds themselves?

EPOPS. What?

PITHETAERUS. You ought to know. What's the life like?

EPOPS (*rising and moving on the bridge as he considers*). Why, it's not a bad sort of life. Of course, you have no money.

EUELPIDES. I'm as good as a bird now. (*PITHETAERUS kicks him.*)

EPOPS. And, naturally, you have none of the problems that go with money.

EUELPIDES. That's logical. (*PITHETAERUS kicks him.*)

EPOPS. The food is nice. White sesame, myrtle, poppies, mint--

EUELPIDES. Worms. (*PITHETAERUS about to kick him, EUELPIDES quickly walks, without making himself erect, from one rock to another.*)

PITHETAERUS (*grandiosely*). I am beginning to conceive a great plan. (*To EPOPS, moving up the rocks at R toward him.*) All you have to do is take my advice.

EPOPS. Take your advice? How?

PITHETAERUS (*after a significant pause*). Found a city!

EPOPS. A city for birds? What kind of city could we have?

PITHETAERUS (*dragging EPOPS to high point UC*). Oh, come on, come on! Don't be a fool. Here. Look down. (*EPOPS bends over the high point and looks down, then waits for PITHETAERUS to say something more; he doesn't.*)

EPOPS. I'm looking.

PITHETAERUS. Now look up.

EPOPS (*repeats business*). I'm looking.

PITHETAERUS. Turn your head around. (*EPOPS does, twisting his head.*) Well! What do you find?

EPOPS. That my neck is getting stiff.

PITHETAERUS. No, no! What do you *see*?

EPOPS. The same old clouds and sky.

PITHETAERUS (*as though it were quite simple*). That's it! The land of the birds!

EPOPS. I knew that.

EUELPIDES (*still below, indifferent*). I knew that. He gets excited about nothing.

PITHETAERUS. But you can turn it into a city!

EPOPS (*incredulous*). A city in the air?

PITHETAERUS. Surround it with walls and fortify it!

EUELPIDES (*to audience*). He's going to surround space.

EPOPS. What for?

PITHETAERUS. To seize all the power of the universe... for yourself. For the birds. (*Offhand.*) And, of course, we'll have a little share in it, too. (*The salesman again.*) You can reign over mankind as you now do over grasshoppers! You can rule the gods!

EPOPS. How?

PITHETAERUS. By starving them into submission.

EPOPS. I don't follow you.

EUELPIDES. You're not the first.

PITHETAERUS. Now, listen! When men are on their last legs, when they're desperate... what is the only thing that can help them?

EPOPS. The gods.

PITHETAERUS. And how do they get the gods to help them?

EPOPS (*indicating a small altar-like rock DL of C*). By offering sacrifice. They put a goat or an ox in the sacrificial fire.

PITHETAERUS (*moving downstage with EPOPS and dramatizing what he says*). And the smoke rises up through the air until it reaches the heavens. The gods notice it, and come to the rescue. Is that right? (*EPOPS nods.*) Listen carefully. In the practical business affairs of Earth, suppose I am a man living in this country. (*Marks out an area on the ground with his foot; EUELPIDES jumps up and puts his foot in the area, helpfully.*) But I want to go to that country over there on business. (*Indicates an area some distance toward R.*) Between the two countries is a middle country which I must pass through. (*EUELPIDES starts to travel toward the second area through middle area, but PITHETAERUS stops him midway.*) Now, when I want to pass through it, what do I have to do?

EPOPS. Pay tribute.

PITHETAERUS. Precisely! (*EUELPIDES reaches for his purse, but it is empty; shrugs, goes away and sits down, L.*) Now here is all that smoke going through *your* country for nothing. But if you build a wall and fortify it, you can demand that men acknowledge you as rulers of the universe and pay you a tribute. Otherwise, *you don't let the smoke through!* (*He pauses for EPOPS and EUELPIDES to grasp and admire this notion.*) In addition, with no smoke coming up, the gods starve to death. You rule the universe!

EPOPS (*his imagination fired, darting about the stage*). By snares! By networks! By cages! That's the cleverest idea I've ever heard. I've been wanting to get back at that Apollo. (*Faces them.*) If I can get the approval of the other birds, I'll do it.

PITHETAERUS. Will you explain the matter to them?

EPOPS. No, *you* will. You're a splendid talker.

EUELPIDES. Splendid.

PITHETAERUS. How will you get them all together?

EPOPS. No trouble at all. I shall awaken dear Procne, my nightingale. Once they hear our voices, they will come to us hot on the wing!

PITHETAERUS. Then hurry, my dear fellow, hurry. Wake up Procne!