Aristophanes’ *The Birds* gave the word “Cloudcuckooland” to the English language, denoting the cerebral space inhabited by unrealistic dreamers. It is a translation of the Greek name Nephelokokkygia, the city-state built by the titular birds of the ancient comedy. This theatrical genre was officially born in 486 BC, by being integrated, for the first time, into the program of the drama competitions of the Classical Athenian state. In an outdoor theater in the sanctuary of the wine-god Dionysus on the southern slope of the Acropolis, a musical chorus of masked men dressed in obscene costumes accompanied knockabout actors who cracked jokes and shouted versified abuse at an audience of tipsy citizens. Comedy was introduced after the Athenian democratic revolution of 507 BC, and it insulted rulers and well-known citizens. Only eleven Athenian democratic comedies survive, all by one dramatist, Aristophanes. Their premieres ran from 425 to 388 BC.

*The Birds* was first performed in the spring of 414 BC. It is Aristophanes’ longest surviving work, and often regarded as his best. Its most attractive feature is its imitations of birdsong; the hoopoe’s *epo popo popo popo*, and the recurring *kikkabau kikkabau* and *tio tio tiotinx*. Although other Aristophanic comedies, such as *The Wasps*, have animal choruses, only *The Birds* sustains the animal identities throughout; consequently, few scholars have been able to resist suggesting that Aristophanes’ hobby was bird watching. The simple story tells how Peisetairos (Friend-Persuader) and his sidekick Euphileides (Optimist) abandon Athens, tired of its endless lawsuits. They arrive at the home of Tereus the hoopoe. After initial hostilities, the bird-chorus implements Peisetairos’s suggestion that they build an aerial city, become a superpower, and wrest cosmic supremacy from the Olympian gods. Peisetairos sees off a succession of visitors, both Athenian and Olympian; finally he marries a divine personification of Sovereignty, thus replacing Zeus as supreme ruler of the universe.

Yet *The Birds* is notoriously difficult to interpret. The bird theme was attractive to a comic poet on account of the association in ancient Greece between birds and their names with Eros, courtship and the phallus, and some argue that it is a purely apolitical fantasy. Others have seen the plan to subjugate Olympus as an Aristophanic protest against the pie-in-the-sky imperialism of his compatriots, who had recently dispatched the Athenian fleet in an ambitious bid for control of Sicily. Others see *The Birds* as a critique of the Athenians’ susceptibility to manipulative politicians who secretly harbored autocratic ambitions. On the other hand, the birds share features with the Athenian empire’s subject states: they are cynically ruled by an Athenian outsider, and harassed by Athenian bureaucrats and informers.

Staged adaptations of *The Birds* go back to the 18th century, when Goethe starred in his own version at the Weimar Court, satirizing the gullibility of the reading public. In Britain, the famous burlesque writer James Planché used *The Birds* in 1846 at the Haymarket Theatre to attack parliamentary reform and the dangers of the railway train. In the summer of 1959, the world-famous Greek Art Theatre, directed by Karolos Koun, premiered their topical production of Aristophanes’ *The Birds*. Branded anticlerical, anti-American and dangerously left leaning, the production was closed down by the government of Constantine Karamanlis and sparked a far-reaching controversy that was to reverberate throughout Europe and North America during the ensuing two decades of unrest in Greece. In the 1960s, several more-lighthearted productions revealed that the Athenians’ disillusioned plan to “drop out” and “get back to nature” was an ancient counterpart of the Californian hippie movement. But in late 20th-century South Africa, *The Birds* (originally part of the curriculum introduced by the colonial master classes, both British and Dutch) was used to address the terrible problem of apartheid. In an Afrikaans adaptation by André P. Brink, staged by the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal’s Youth Theatre in 1971, the birds created a new flag for the new kingdom out of yellow, green and black feathers, the colors of the African National Congress, at that time a banned organization. It is hardly surprising that, having been shown capable of serving such a variety of agendas, Aristophanic theater is alive and well in the 21st century, thoroughly refuting the gloomy *Daily Chronicle* reviewer of a performance of *The Birds* at Cambridge University as long ago as 1890, that “Greek plays are a fashion unlikely to last.”

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