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Edited by J.B. Lightfoot, F.J.A. Hort and J.E.B. Mayor

Excerpt

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I.

The "Birds" of Aristophanes.

SÜVERN'S Essay on the "Birds" of Aristophanes was first published in the "Transactions of the Royal Academy of Sciences at Berlin," in the year 1830. An English Translation by W. R. Hamilton, F.R.S., made its appearance five years afterwards. Certain of Professor Süvern's conclusions have been called in question by various German writers, but, so far as I know, his theory of interpretation has never been assailed. His general views have been received with unqualified assent, certainly without protest, by English scholars; and the book is still recommended to students about to read the "Birds," as supplying the master-key to the poet's meaning. Those who recommend it share, I presume, in the Translator's "earnest conviction that Professor Süvern has fully and completely succeeded in proving the proposition he has advanced:" it cannot therefore be out of place to confess, on the other hand, an earnest conviction that the said proposition is utterly untenable. I shall endeavour to prove this assertion so far as my limits will allow. They will not allow me to combat Prof. Süvern step by step,—a process alike wearisome and unnecessary, for, if the basis of the theory be proved unsound, all the indices and lexicons in the world will not suffice to establish it. I do not undervalue his research, I acknowledge the plausibility of his conjectures as to the meaning of some isolated passages; I deny his general proposition, viz. that the "Birds," over and above its obvious plot and purpose,

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contains a subtle, recondite allegory, which the poet maintains from the beginning to the end, and works into the minutest details.

I will first state as fairly as I can the main points of this theory, and then endeavour to shew that it is inconsistent with the whole tenor of the play and the facts of history, that it is unsupported by evidence, contrary to analogy, and alien to the nature of Ancient Comedy.

I beg, however, to premise that when I arraign this statement as untrue, or that argument as unfair, I do not impute any intention to mislead: I merely assert that the parent of the theory by his passionate affection for his offspring is blinded to its faults.

Süvern's main points are briefly these (given as far as possible in his own words): Over and above the avowed and patent purpose of "exhibiting to the public eye a view of the extreme corruption, perversity, and vanity of the Athenian life and manners in general, particularly the licentiousness of the demagogues, &c.," Aristophanes had a special and less obvious design of exposing the Sicilian expedition "as essentially a chimerical phantom, which none but a vain ambitious population, of inflammable, giddy and volatile men, could have been induced to pursue; and besides several serious admonitions which are scattered about here and there, he clearly shews the selfish views in which it was conceived, and in the accomplishment of which it is likely to end" (p. 26); that is to say, that Alcibiades had conceived the expedition with a view to make himself Despot of Athens, and through Athens, of Greece.

The Birds represent the Athenian people; the Gods, the Spartans as their principal allies; the men, the smaller dependent Greek states, collectively; Peisthetærus combines the chief characteristics of Alcibiades and Gorgias, Euelpides represents the credulous populace of Athens in conjunction with Polus of Agrigentum, and the Epops is meant for Lamachus.

"In pursuance of the poet's ironical fiction, the strangers who have wandered so far from Athens that they can no longer find their way back to their country, are really only conducted into the Pnyx; thus the action is carried on in the very seat and centre of the life of the Athenian people." (p. 31.)

It was impossible that the author of this theory could over-

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look the numerous passages which directly contravene it. Indeed he himself collects and puts forward at the very outset of his work a number of passages in which "the birds and men are blended together in their signification" (p. 10), and others, again, in which the Gods are confounded with both. "Indeed," (he says), "to complete the confusion, the birds themselves, in whom the fundamental characteristics of the Athenian manners and constitution are satirized, have also such excellent and praiseworthy qualities, that in many of these they are evidently brought forward as models for the Athenians, &c." (p. 11.)

To an ordinary mind the simplest way of solving the difficulties would have been the abandonment of the theory. When the work of a great artist presents to you only "intricate confusion," the natural inference is, that you have chosen a false point of view. But your learned German is not so easily moved from his *standpunkt*. Hear how Prof. Süvern disposes of these manifest objections:

"No wonder then that this intricate confusion has thrown a veil over the fundamental idea of the poem, and has led to the opinion, that the author had merely in view a general satire on mankind, on the notions and relations of man, though with a special reference to the Athenian people. We shall not however be led astray by it, if we reflect on the one hand, that such confusion is quite appropriate and congenial to the roguish humour of comic poetry, which conceals its aim in the play of a perpetually shifting irony, and thereby makes a stronger impression upon those who see through it; and on the other, that we can easily distinguish what belongs to each of the three divisions, as a party implicated in the undertaking, from that which is extraneous to it; as for example in reference to the men, what belongs to them as one of those parties, and what to them as men; and in reference to the birds, what properly belongs to them as parties in the action, what in virtue of the masks given to them, and what as they compose the chorus. We must also take with us, that the confusion which we observe would naturally proceed from the object of the comedy; it being necessary, at the period at which 'The Birds' was brought out, that this object should be to a certain degree concealed. Whilst at the same time, with respect to the several parties engaged in the action, without impairing their fundamental diversity, it admitted

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of assimilating them in the course of working out the parts, and thus of satirizing the one by means of the others.”

In the first place, we detect a glaring inconsistency in the Professor's main proposition. According to him Aristophanes considered the Sicilian expedition to be “an essentially chimerical phantom,” and yet expected it to be crowned with such signal success as to make its originator Supreme Lord of the subjugated Grecian world. If the scheme was likely to succeed, how could it be “essentially chimerical?”

Waiving the inconsistency, I think I can shew that both parts of the proposition are unworthy of our assent; the first being incapable of proof, and the second demonstrably false.

I say then, first, that we have no ground whatever for supposing that Aristophanes did not share fully in the sanguine hopes of the vast majority of his countrymen. The whole play contains no word of warning; not a hint of impending misfortunes troubles its exuberant gaiety. For, in truth, no human foresight could have anticipated the disasters which befel the armament; disasters for which Greek history afforded no precedent. The most timid might have supposed that the cautious Nicias would at all events secure a safe retreat for his forces. I have no doubt that the expedition and the extravagant hopes of further conquest which Thucydides tells us were entertained by his countrymen, suggested to the comic poet the wild plot of the “Birds,” as a piece of innocent satire which quizzed but did not censure, which jumped with their humour rather than blamed it. I see no reason to doubt that he with all Athens (except perhaps Socrates and Meton, if any reliance can be placed on Plutarch's gossip,) anticipated the fall of Syracuse, and only grumbled at the tardiness of the principal commander, the *μελλο-νικιάν*, which delayed so glorious a consummation.

Secondly, it is demonstrably false that Aristophanes meant to warn his countrymen that the result of the expedition would be, to invest Alcibiades with the *βασιλεία*.

Süvern quietly tells us, near the end of his “Essay” (p. 141), ‘When the ‘Birds’ came out it was not known what had been the result of dispatching the Salaminia for Alcibiades, how he had himself received the summons, or how it had been taken by the crew of the fleet, &c.’ Now on this point depends the whole question, and yet Süvern, so prodigal elsewhere of needless illus-

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tration, has not advanced an atom of proof in support of this all-important assumption. I say, all-important, because if it can be disproved, all the theory, so far as Alcibiades is concerned, falls to the ground. That the Salaminia had already been sent, is obvious from lines 145 sqq.:

οἱ μοι μηδαμῶς
ἡμῖν γε παρὰ θάλατταν ἴν' ἀνακίψεται
κλητῆρ' ἄγουσ' ἔωθεν ἡ Σαλαμινία.

Now I do not dwell on the manifest improbability that this long play had been written and studied by the actors and performed in the interval between the sending of the Salaminia and its return—a month, I suppose, at most; I think it can be shewn that the Salaminia had not only been sent, but come back, and Alcibiades in all probability condemned to death, ἐρήμη δίκη, before the production of the play.

The first *ὑπόθεσις* prefixed to the play tells us ἐδιδάχθη ἐπὶ χαβρίου ἐν ἄστει; the second says the same, καθῆκεν εἰς ἄστυ, with the additional information that he produced the Ἀμφιάραος at the Lenæan festival of the same year. There is no ground for questioning that this statement is derived from the διδασκαλίαι: it has never been questioned by any one. The Birds then was first performed at the city Dionysia in the year 414 B. C. The city Dionysia were celebrated at the very close of winter. This is proved (if proof were necessary) by a multitude of passages, among others, by Thucyd. v. 20: Αὐται αἱ σπονδαὶ ἐγένοντο τελευτῶντος τοῦ χειμῶνος ἅμα ἤρι ἐκ Διονυσίων εὐθὺς τῶν ἀστικῶν, κ. τ. λ. Thucydides, as we know, divides the year into two seasons only, the summer and the winter, assigning to the latter about five months, ending with the vernal equinox, or thereabouts. Its length might vary by a few days or even weeks, according as the weather was more or less favourable for the continuance or resumption of military operations on a great scale. The winter in question must have been of the average length at least, to allow time for the incidents related by Thucydides from ch. 63 to 93 of B. VI. (inclusive). There is the expedition to Syracuse, and the battle under its walls, the return to Naxos and Catana, the attempt upon Messene, where the Athenians remained thirteen days, and then returned to Naxos. After this a trireme is dispatched to Athens requesting that money and horses may be sent by the beginning of spring. The vote is passed; the money and horses are

collected and arrive in Sicily immediately after the resumption of active hostilities, ἄμα τῷ ἡρι εὐθὺς ἀρχομένα. The winter therefore cannot well have commenced later than the beginning of November.

Again, the summer was not ended when Alcibiades was sent for home. Thucydides, after recounting summarily the flight of Alcibiades and his subsequent condemnation as events which succeeded each other at no long interval, proceeds in the 62d chapter to relate the operations of the two remaining generals, (μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα, κ.τ.λ.), the division of the forces into two parts, the expedition to Egesta, the fruitless attempt upon Himera, and capture of Hykkara, the return to Catana, the sale of the captives, the failure before Hybla, &c. for which we must at least allow four or five weeks. And then the summer ended—καὶ τὸ θέρος ἐτελεύτα.

From this I conclude that the Salaminia arrived at Catana with the summons for Alcibiades not later than the beginning of October. The intelligence of his flight would be reported at Athens by that swift-sailing trireme perhaps before the end of the month. His speech at Sparta was probably delivered before the end of January, (vid. Thuc. vi. 88 sqq.)

So far, then, from Aristophanes having any occasion in the middle of March to warn his countrymen against the growing power of Alcibiades at Athens, he had been for five months an exile, had been condemned to death for what appeared to the people in their then temper the most revolting of crimes, and was known to be most zealous in the service of the enemy.

That there should be no further reference throughout the play to an event which must have profoundly affected the Athenian mind, need not surprise us.

It was a subject too dangerous for a jest, and the number of those implicated in the same accusation was too great to admit of its being a fit topic for the buffooneries of comedy in the presence of a miscellaneous audience. I think that the Poet's regard for the success of his piece, and for his own personal safety, would be quite sufficient to deter him from jesting on this subject, therefore I hesitate to accept Droysen's notion (Mus. Rhen. iv. p. 60) that the mention of it was specially prohibited by the enactment moved by Syracosius, although Meineke (ii. p. 948) gives in his adhesion. If Droysen's opinion be correct, what

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becomes of Süvern's? His theory is then not only contrary to probability, and (as I have shewn) disproved by chronology, but absolutely prohibited by law. We have already convicted him of *ἀναχρόνισμος*, we may now file a *γραφὴ παρανόμων*.

I proceed briefly to examine some of the principal details of Süvern's allegory.

1. "The Birds represent the Athenian people."

According to my view, the Birds represent the Birds, and nothing else. There is positively no reason for supposing that the scene represented the Athenian Pnyx, except the occurrence of the word *πέτρα*! In lines 10 and 11 we are expressly told that Attica was not even visible; Euelpides says (30 sqq.) that he and his companion have left Athens in search of a quiet life. When the Herald returns to announce the reception of his message by mankind, it is its effect at Athens on which he especially dwells (1277 sqq.)

Again, the Birds (as Süvern has himself remarked) are frequently proposed as models for men in general and Athenians in particular.

These multiplied incongruities do not disturb the Professor. His is the most "headstrong allegory" on record. The said incongruities were intended, it seems, "to throw a veil over the fundamental idea of the poem." Truly the veil is so thick that I am sure not one of the ten thousand spectators could see through it.

Whether is it more probable that Aristophanes, after constructing an elaborate allegory, intentionally and deliberately violated and falsified it in a hundred instances, or that he sketched a general plot, the scene of which being in fairy-land admitted all kinds of fantastic vagaries, and then gave full play to his imagination and allowed his fun to run riot? On the latter hypothesis, the inconsistencies are natural, on the former, unaccountable.

2. "The Gods represent the Spartans and Peloponnesians, together with the principal states in alliance with them."

Because, forsooth, "the balance of power was leaning to the Spartan side," and, "the political weight and credit of the Athenians was sunken by the defeats at Oropus and Delium, and by the advances made by the Spartans on the frontiers of Thrace."

This is a monstrous perversion of historical fact. Nothing so “sophistical” can be detected in Peisthetærus even by a German Professor predetermined to find “sophistry” everywhere. The Athenians had indeed suffered serious checks and severe defeats at Oropus, Delium, Amphipolis, and elsewhere; but no one who reads the history of the Peloponnesian war, without a preconceived theory to maintain, can fail to see that their affairs were to all appearance more prosperous at the commencement of the year 414, than they were when the war began. They had destroyed the prestige of the Spartan name, had detached Argos from her alliance, and in fact felt themselves so secure at home that they conceived the idea of employing their superabundant strength in the Sicilian expedition. It is impossible not to assent to the truth of Grote’s remark, that the Melian Dialogue is introduced by Thucydides to illustrate the overweening insolence of the Athenians in this the culminating period of their prosperity: to point the moral, so striking to the Greek mind, that pride goes before a fall, exactly in the same spirit as the Poet’s, when he makes Agamemnon walk over purple to the House of Death.

No Athenian audience would have tolerated at any time, least of all at this time, a drama which represented themselves as gaping, light-minded, feeble birds, and their enemies as Olympian Gods. What says Alcibiades (Thucyd. vi. 17)? *Καὶ νῦν οὐτε ἀνέλπιστοὶ πω μᾶλλον Πελοποννήσιοι ἐς ἡμᾶς ἐγένοντο, κ.τ.λ.**; an assertion which, sanguine and vainglorious as he was, he would

* Mr Grote’s interpretation of this passage seems to me quite untenable. “As to the Peloponnesians, powerful as they were, they were not more desperate enemies than they had been in former days:” and in a note he explains ἀνέλπιστοι to mean “enemies beyond our hopes of being able to deal with,” referring to Thuc. vii. 4, and vii. 47. (Grote, *Hist. Gr.* Vol. vii. p. 210).

Now, in the first place, the Athenians did not consider the Peloponnesians “desperate enemies” at any time of their history till after the battle of Ægos Potami, least of all at this time.

Again, if this be the meaning of the clause, how can the following *εἶτε καὶ*

πάνυ ἐββώνται be translated at all?

The two passages referred to do not justify Mr Grote’s interpretation, because the word is, in both, neuter. vii. 4, *ὄρων τὰ ἐκ τῆς γῆς σφίσιω... ἀνελπιστότερα ὄντα.* vii. 47, *τὰ τε ἄλλα ὅτι ἀνέλπιστα αὐτοῖς ἐφαίνετο.* I do not know of a single instance of ἀνελπιστος as applied to persons having the passive signification. The sense therefore is: “In the first place (τε) the Peloponnesians never were so hopeless of success against us; and, secondly, (τε) supposing them to be in ever such good heart, they can but invade us by land, and that we cannot prevent in any case, while we shall always leave a

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scarcely have ventured to make if he had not been sure of being borne out by the general sense of the assembly.

Nicias, at all events, is a witness perfectly unexceptionable. His language is quite clear as to the fact, that the war hitherto had resulted in unlooked-for success to Athens, and had raised her hopes as much as it had depressed the prestige and credit of Sparta. (Thucyd. VI. 11): ὅπερ νῦν ὑμεῖς ὦ Ἀθηναῖοι ἐς Λακεδαιμονίους καὶ τοὺς ξυμμάχους πεπόνθατε· διὰ τὸ παρὰ γνώμην αὐτῶν πρὸς ἂ ἐφοβείσθε τὸ πρῶτον περιγεγενησθαι καταφρονήσαντες ἤδη καὶ Σικελίας ἐφίεσθε· χρῆ δὲ μὴ πρὸς τὰς τύχας τῶν ἐναντίων ἐπαίρεσθαι, ἀλλὰ τὰς διανοίας κρατήσαντες θαρρύν· μηδὲ Λακεδαιμονίους ἄλλο τι ἡγήσασθαι ἢ διὰ τὸ αἰσχρὸν σκοπεῖν ὄτω τρόπῳ ἔτι καὶ νῦν, ἣν δύνωνται, σφήλαντες ἡμᾶς τὸ σφέτερον ἀπρεπὲς εἶθ' ἠθύνονται, κ.τ.λ.

I do not think it worth while to refute this assertion of Süvern's at greater length; it is enough to appeal to any history of the period ever written from Thucydides to Grote.

3. "The men represent the smaller Greek states, collectively."

Not a shadow of proof is adduced in support of this notion, which indeed Süvern seems only to have taken up as a *pis aller*, because it was necessary to find some prototype for οἱ ἄνθρωποι cursorily mentioned in the play. It is sufficiently refuted by the speech of the Herald (1277 sqq.) above referred to, in which, while professing to relate how men in general had received the commands of Peisthetærus, he relates only how the Athenians had received them. I assert positively that there is not a line in the whole play whereby a spectator could divine that the poet meant by "men," the smaller states of Greece. When he says "men," he means "men"—*voilà tout*.

4. "Peisthetærus combines the chief characteristics of Alcibiades and Gorgias."

This strange statement appears to me to be implicitly refuted (so far as concerns Alcibiades) by what I have urged respecting the interval between the mission of the Salaminia and the production of the play.

It will, however, be worth our while to examine the question more closely, in order to shew (1) that—besides the *à priori*

sufficient naval force at home to prevent their attacking us by sea." Little errors become important in a work whose au-

thority is paramount, like that of Mr Grote.

improbability that Alcibiades would be introduced under the circumstances—the play itself contains no ground for supposing that he is introduced; and (2) that the notion about Gorgias is as unsupported by internal, as it confessedly is by external, evidence. With regard, then, to Alcibiades—In the first place I cannot do better than quote the words of an author, perhaps the only one whose opinion Prof. Süvern would admit to be of equal weight with his own:

“Some commentators have, indeed, attempted to draw a comparison between Peisthetairos in this play, and Alcibiades; but this is totally without foundation; the former is no war-loving commander, but the faithful counsellor of the public, who unites the volatile, fickle people of the birds, and explains to them the power they would possess, if they would combine together in a well-fortified city, which being constructed midway between the gods and the men, would make both dependent upon them. He then directs the foundation of the city, and the ordinary affairs of the community, whilst the foreign relations, the forts, and garrisons are attended to by Epops, as commander-in-chief; he thus succeeds in securing to the birds the service of mankind, and recovers for them from the gods the sovereignty which they had lost. Here is a demagogue and commander of a very different character from that of Alcibiades; and whilst Peisthetairos, instead of exerting himself to destroy the democracy, makes minced meat of the anti-democratical birds (v. 1584), Alcibiades finished his career by the overthrow of the democratic constitution of his country.”

This passage, with which I cordially agree, occurs in *Professor Süvern's* Essay on the “Clouds” (p. 58, Eng. Tr.), and was published just one year before the production of the Essay on the “Birds.” In the former Essay, his object was to prove that Pheidippides meant Alcibiades; in the latter Essay, that proposition is discreetly ignored: it would be too glaringly absurd to say that Pheidippides and Peisthetærus were derived from the same prototype.

But further, Alcibiades was in the prime of life, Peisthetærus is an elderly man; cf. 320, *φήμ' ἀπ' ἀνθρώπων ἀφίχθαι δεῦρο πρεσβύτα δόο*. Alcibiades was distinguished for restless activity, and entered with hearty enjoyment into all the busy phases of Athenian life; Peisthetærus, disgusted with the same life, for-