The Dramatic, Rhythmic, Musical, & Choreographic Structure of Birds

A. Pisetaerus and Euelpides seek out Tereus 1-91 IT
   (i) Peisetaerus and Euelpides explain their journey 1-48
   (ii) Arrival at Tereus’ home and interview with the Servant Bird 49-91
B. Pisetaerus and Euelpides meet Tereus 92-208 IT
   (i) Discussion of the Athenians’ desire to emigrate 92-161
   (ii) Pisetaerus has a great idea—a bird-city in the air 162-208
C. Pisetaerus and Euelpides meet the birds 209-450
   (i) Tereus summons all the birds 209-266
      sung anapests 209-222
      Solo lyric: introduction iambic birdcall 227-229
      field birds dochm., iamb., dact., troch. 230-237
      garden birds ionic, dochmiac 238-239
      birds of the hills troch., anap. dim., cretic 240-242
      wetland birds cretic 243-249
      seabirds dactylic (Alcman) 250-254
      conclusion all longs into troch. 255-262
      263-266 IT
   (ii) Heralded by four exotic “extras,” the Bird Chorus arrives 267-326
      anapestic birdcall 267
      dochmiac or anapestic 268-309 TTC
      dochmiac or anapestic 310-312 TTC
      dochmiac or anapestic 314-316 TTC
      anapestic or sync. trochaic 319
      320-326 TTC
   (iii) The birds threaten to kill the men, but are restrained by Tereus 327-399
      Strophe: extra metrum 327
      anap., 1st very res. into all longs 328-332
      dochmiac 333-335
      (katakeleusmos + epirrhêma) 336-342 TTC
      Antistrophe: [as Strophe] 343-348
      paemonic (unparalleled switch) 349-351
      (antikatakeleusmos + antepirrhêma) 352-385 TTC
      386-399 pnigos
   (iv) The battle is over; Tereus negotiates a truce 400-450
      anapestic kommation: recited 400-404
      sung 405
      Lyric duet (amoibaion): mainly iambic 406-433
      434-450 IT
D. Debate (agon) between Pisetaerus and the birds 451-626
   (i) Ode: Ch. asks P. to explain his vision “free” da.-ep., with ithyph. cl. 451-459
   (ii) Katakeleusmos: Ch. to P.: speak w/o fear; we won’t break the truce 460-461 ATC
   (iii) Epirrhēma: P. declares that the birds are oldest beings, kings, gods 462-522 ATC
   (iv) Pnigos: P. describes man’s inhumanity to birds 523-538 pnigos
   (v) Antode: the birds hail P. as savior [as Ode] 539-547
   (vi) Antikatakeleusmos: Ch. asks P. what they must do 548-549 ATC
   (vii) Antiepirrhēma: P. expounds his strategy to birds, answers doubts 550-610 ATC
   (viii) Antipnigos: birds are cheap & convenient for men to worship 611-626 pnigos

E. Transitional scene before the parabasis 627-675
   (i) Recitative and lyric: Ch. expresses its conversion to P.’s views 627-637
       Choral lyric: mainly iambic (some sync.) 629-635 ATC
       636-637 ATC
   (ii) P. introd. himself and Eu. to Tereus, meet Nightingale, enter nest 638-675
       (accompanied by aulos) 658-660 ATC
       661-675 IT

F. Parabasis 676-800
   (i) Kommation: req. for N.’s accompan. aeolic (esp. glyconic) 676-684
   (ii) Parabasis proper: on the origin and power of birds 685-722 ATC
   (iii) Pnigos: how the birds will reward mankind for worshipping them 723-736 pnigos
   (iv) Ode: celebr. woodland birds’ song dactylic, some troch., birdcalls 737-752
   (v) Epirrhēma: Ch. invites audience to come & share the birds’ liberty 753-768 TTC
   (vi) Antode: celebrating swans’ song [as Ode] 769-784
   (vii) Antiepirrhēma: the Chorus lists some advantages of having wings 785-800 TTC

G. The new bird-city is named and inaugurated 801-902
   (i) P. and Eu., now winged, agree w/ Ch. on name; Eu. dispatched 801-850 IT
   (ii) Strophe: pro-sacrifice mainly iambic (some sync.) 851-858
   (iii) Sacrifice to inaugurate the new city [priest’s prayers in prose] 859-894 IT cett.
   (iv) Antistrophe: gods called [as Strophe] 895-902

H. Iambic scenes 903-1057 IT cett.
   [except: poet’s Pindaric meters 904-953; oracles in dactylic hexameter 967-988; decrees and summons in prose 1035-1050]
   (i) First intruder: a poor poet looking for patronage 903-957
   (ii) Second intruder: an oracle-monger tries to profit from the sacrif. 958-991
   (iii) Third intruder: Meton proposes to draw a town-plan for Cloudc. 992-1020
   (iv) Fourth intruder: an Athenian Special Inspector investig. Cloudc. 1021-1034
   (v) Fifth intruder: a vendor of imperialist decrees offers Cl. new laws 1035-1057
I. Second parabasis

(i) Ode: the birds sing a hymn praising themselves
   *spondaic (lyric) anapests*
   1058-1064

(ii) *Epirrhēma*: Ch. proclaims birdmongers (incl. Philocrates) outlaws
   1072-1087

(iii) Antode: celebr. climatic immunity
   [as Ode]
   1088-1101

(iv) *Antepirrhēma*: birds canvass judges’ votes by promises & threats
   1102-1117

J. The wall is built and breached

(i) A messenger reports that the bird-wall is completed
   1118-1167

(ii) A guard from the wall reports that a god has entered the air
   1168-1187

K. Birds call for vigilance

   *Strophe*: *dochmiac*
   1188-1195

L. Iris intercepted and ejected

   [poss. iamb. dimeter 1196]
   1196-1261

M. The blockade succeeds

   *Antistrophe*: [as Strophe]
   1262-1268

N. Mankind is bird-mad

   1269-1312

O. New city prepares wings for incomers (& birds sing of city’s assets)

   *Strophe*: *mainly aeolic (or “free” da.-ep.)*
   1313-1322

   sync. (1323 resolv.) *iamb. dimet.*
   1323-1324

   *Antistrophe*: [as Strophe]
   1325-1334

P. Three applicants for wings arrive

(i) A rebellious son
   [1337-9 da.-ep., ithyph. cl.]
   1337-1371

(ii) Cinesias the dithyrambic poet
   1372-1409

   [except: 1372-4, 1376-7 choriambic (Anacreon); end of 1380-1 breaks into pherecratean;
   1393-1400 aeolic into anapestic]

(iii) A shabby sycophant
   [1410-1 aeol. (Alc.), 1412 σκόλι.
   1412-1469

Q. The birds sing of wonders seen on their travels

(i) The Cleonymus tree
   *Strophe A*: *trochaic*
   1470-1481

(ii) Dark land of dead
   *Antistrophe A*: [as Strophe A]
   1482-1493

R. Prometheus delivers vital intelligence

   1494-1552

S. Lake where ghosts raised

   *Strophe B*: [as Strophe A]
   1553-1564

T. Divine embassy accepts P.’s peace-terms

   [law in prose, 1661-1666]
   1565-1693

U. The tongue-belly tribe

   *Antistrophe B*: [as Strophe A, +1 syll. 1701]
   1694-1705

V. The arrival of Pisetaerus and Basileia is announced

   1706-1719
W. The birds hail the bridegroom, Zeus’ successor (exodos) 1720-1765  
  
  Hymenaios:  Strophe  
  Antistrophe  
  [as Strophe]  
  
  troch., molossi, choriamb. 1720-1725  
  recited anapests 1726-1730  
  aecic 1731-1736  
  anapestic 1743-1747  
  dactylic, with pherec. cl. 1748-1754  
  iambic dimeters, lecythia 1755-1765  

Abbreviations and terms used

Dialogue meters (see my handout, “Three Meters of Aristophanic Dialogue”):

IT iambic trimeter  
TTC trochaic tetrameter catalectic  
ATC anapestic tetrameter catalectic  

“Strophe” and “Antistrophe” refer to song stanzas sung and danced by the whole chorus, closely corresponding in rhythm (see “ant(i)-” below). The terms “lyric” and “ode” also definitely imply lines that are sung, not spoken.

accompan. (musical) accompaniment  
aeol. Aeolic verse is a large and important range of verse types, expanded on the basis of a nucleus of one or more choriambics (˘˘), and associated with their early use by Sappho and Alcaeus.  
Alc. Alcaeus (the Archaic Lesbian poet)  
anap. anapestic (foot ˘˘, which is frequently substituted by ˘˘ and ˘); may be used in lyric, but for details see my “Dialogue Meters” handout  
ant(i)- “counter-”: corresponding closely to the rhythm of a previous passage (in highly symmetrical parts of the drama, esp. scenes of action/conflict)  
aulos the oboe-like instrument used for accompaniment, esp. of recitation  
celebr. celebrating  
cett. in the other parts, otherwise (i.e., apart from the exceptions noted)  
Ch. Chorus  
choriamb. choriambic, based on the choriamb (˘˘˘)  
Cl., Cloudc. Cloudcuckoottown, Cloudcuckooville, Cloudcuckooland  
cretic the foot ˘˘  
cretic-paeonic cretic verse featuring frequent resolution into the 1st paeon (˘˘˘)
dact. dactylic (foot ˘˘˘); dactylic hexameter (— — — — — — — — ||)
is the meter of oracles, as in Birds 967-988, and more generally the meter
of epic (e.g., the Iliad and Odyssey)
da.-ep. dactylo-epitrite, a meter built on the expansion of dactyls (into, e.g.,
˘˘˘˘˘˘ and cretics (into, e.g., ˘˘˘)
dim., dimet. dimer (verse with two metra of a given kind)
dithyrambic A dithyramb is a choral song in honor of Dionysus; like tragedy and
comedy, it was performed competitively at Athenian festivals including
the Great Dionysia.
dochm. dochmiac, the rhythm x˘x˘x and its resolved variants
Du. according to the analysis of Nan Dunbar (see Sources, below)
e.g. for example (exempli gratia)
epirrhêma esp., and in ancient usage, the chorus-leader’s speech (possibly chanted)
after the parabasis, generally in TTC; part of a highly symmetrical scene
and answered by an antepirrhêma, see ant(i)- above; extended to refer to
the first of the two opposing speeches in a debate (agôn)
esp.
exodos song sung by the chorus at their departure from the theater
Eu. Euelpides
extra metrum not forming part of the metrical scheme, as sometimes an interjection
glyconic the aeolic metrical unit o o ˘˘˘˘˘˘, where the aeolic base o o is ˘, ˘, or ˘
iamb. iambic (may be used in lyric, but for details see my “Dialogue Meters”
handout)
i.e. that is (id est)
incl. including
ionic The ionic metron is ˘˘˘.
itthyph. cl. a clausula (concluding rhythm) in the ithyphallic form (˘˘˘˘˘˘)
katakeleusmos the chorus-leader’s encouragement or exhortation to speak; precedes an
epirrhêma
kommation a short introductory passage; esp., and in ancient usage, a lyric sung
before the parabasis
lecythium ˘˘˘˘˘˘
molossus ˘˘˘
N. Nightingale
P. Pisetaerus
paeonic based on the rhythm of the 1st paeon (˘˘˘), generally in cretic verse
parabasis a passage in which the chorus comes forward (παραβαίνω) and addresses
the audience; more loosely, the highly structured scene in which the
parabasis occurs (see part F of Birds above, and compare part I, which is
called a second parabasis because of its similar symmetrical structure)
pherec. cl.  a clausula (concluding rhythm) in the form of a pherecratean
pherecratean  the aeolic metrical unit oo-~~~ (compare “glyconic” above for oo)

pnigos  The Greek word means “choking, stifling” and is applied to the
breathlessness of a long run of trochaic or anapestic 
metra, used to end a
passage in TTC or ATC. Only at the very end of the pnigos do we get the
concluding catalexis (see my “Dialogue Meters” handout).

recitative, recited  lines chanted, neither spoken (as dialogue) nor sung (as lyric)
req.  request
res., resolv.  resolved (i.e., with ~ in place of ~)
sacrif.  sacrifice
σκόλι.  a certain 11-syllable aeolic line (= glyconic + ~~~), associated with the
σκόλιον (“drinking song”); known as the phalaecian hendecasyllable
spondaic  based on the spondee (foot ~)
syll.  syllable
sync.  syncopated (in iambics and trochaics, the suppression or omission of one
or more syllables from some metra)
troch.  trochaic (may be used in lyric, but for details see my “Dialogue Meters”
handout)

Sources
The plot summary and divisions are taken directly from Nan Dunbar’s commentary (Oxford
1998), with few departures, mostly just condensation. For the metrical analyses, I have
depended on Dunbar, Sommerstein’s commentary (Aris & Phillips 1987), and Parker’s Songs of
Aristophanes (Oxford 1997), filling in some details myself.

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