

Aristophanes, *Aves* 507

In the lines immediately preceding Ar. Av. 507, Pisthetairus has been bragging of the ancient glories of the race of Birds. He says: "Of Egypt and all Phoenicia a cuckoo was king; when the cuckoo cried 'cuckoo', then all the Phoenicians would go reap the wheat and barley in their fields" ¹).

To this Euelpides replies: "Oh, that's why we have the saying: κόκκυ' ψωλοὶ πεδίοινδε." Precisely what this phrase was intended to mean has never been clear.

A scholiast has suggested that these three words represent a call to go into the fields, for the cuckoo has appeared; and that the ψωλοὶ are Egyptian and Phoenician slaves, i. e. 'circumcised'. The phrase would then presumably mean: "The cuckoo (is here)! Slaves, to the fields!"

I think it is clear that this explanation is of little use. The function of Euelpides throughout the entire scene is that of interlocutor, of a sort of 'end man' in a minstrel show, who takes the comparatively serious statements of Pisthetairus and gives them a comic or nonsensical twist. Whatever his answer may turn out to mean, it was intended to be funny.

C. H. Stearn (Classical Philology Vol. 28 [1933] page 207) has suggested a more satisfactory explanation.

I should like to propose, however, an interpretation which, though bold, is thoroughly Aristophanic, and, it seems to me, fulfills all the requirements of the context.

Let us assume that ψωλός is used here not in the sense of 'circumcised' but in the meaning in which Aristophanes himself employs it elsewhere (Eq. 964): i. e. vir praeputio retractato; and that πεδίων too, is used not to mean "a field" but as Aristophanes employs it elsewhere (Lys. 88): i. e. pudenda muliebria. The phrase now makes sense, of itself; and when considered as a retort to the words of Pisthetairus provides a most typical, and most obscene, example of Aristophanic *repartee*.

One thing more, a rather more remote possibility. The words of interlocutor Euelpides indicate that he is either quoting or deliberately misquoting some proverbial or colloquial saying. Very well known in antiquity was the cuckoo's practice of laying his eggs in other bird's nests ²). Might not the burden of the popular saw have been: "Here comes an adulterer! ³). Men, see to your women!" ⁴).

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¹) Bohn's English Translation.

²) See Aristotle H. A. 618a 8.

³) An obvious metaphor, freely found in Plautus (cf. Asin. 923, etc.).

⁴) Metaphors of this type abound in the vulgar speech of most known languages.