

Since the middle ages, writers have been sprinkling the seas with imaginary islands, lost kingdoms, and otherworldly realms. Ancient utopias, however, are few, and they seem to be the property of philosophers more than of dramatic authors. Various reasons have been given, but I find Thomas Hubbard's distinction between "Arcadian" and "Utopian" settings to be quite useful. If one defines a "Utopia" as a setting which inverts some part of the contemporary or near-future world, then the term "Arcadian" suitably describes a narrative set in an idealized or mythical past. Seen in this light, the orientation of most Greek literature is strongly Arcadian. Tragedies almost always take place in an "age of heroes." Comedy, at least as practiced by Aristophanes, pleads frequently and stridently (with what degree of irony we cannot be sure) to return to the morals and customs of previous generations.

It is not until Aristophanes' *Birds* (414 BC) that we see a remarkable attempt to construct an imaginary future for Greece. The rogue Athenian Peisthetairos concocts a scheme to build a "third world" between Earth and Olympus. That this world comes into being during the course of the play is remarkable; it is as though we are allowed to witness the birth of a new direction for imaginative literature.

Before construction can begin on the "baked brick walls" of Cloudcuckooland, however, Peisthetairos must convince the chorus of birds, and, by extension, of Athenians, that this is not something "neoteric" but in fact something justified by the precedent of the mythical past. In this paper, I will discuss Hubbard's Arcadia/Utopia distinction and delineate some of the Arcadian leanings of Greek tragedy. I will then focus on the extraordinary proof Peisthetairos puts forth as justification for establishing the bird-kingdom, and I will show how he carefully couches his arguments for building a Utopia in stolidly Arcadian terms. Through a delirious medley of folktale, myth, ribald commonplace and questionable theology, Peisthetairos establishes a mythical precedent for a bird-kingdom that only a comic hero could produce. The chorus at first pours withering disapproval on the scheme, but they are gradually won over by appeals to their heroic past, to a sort of cockeyed piety, and to their desire for material gain. In this way, they are remarkably like the Athenian assembly. In this way also, the creation of a Utopia, an altered contemporary world, is made palatable to an audience with a strong taste for tradition that is ever at odds with their desire for the new.