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**IV.- Four Dances in the Birds of Aristophanes  
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**This paper is summarized in the concluding paragraph**

In the *Birds* of Aristophanes, lines 266-293, the singing out of four winged creatures for special comment and pleasantry, just before the entrance of the chorus, has puzzled and intrigued many students of Old Comedy. Professor Warren E. Blake, speaking before a meeting of this association, (1) has expressed the opinion that the four birds so treated are in reality members of the chorus, which in this play consists of twenty eight individuals, fourteen male and fourteen female. Merry (2) is inclined to think that the four birds "take the part of the band, for the musical accompaniments", and that they station themselves in the orchestra. Haigh (3) is of a similar opinion. The Loeb edition of Aristophanes (4) merely comments, "Four birds pass before the audience, and disappear on the other side".

For some time it had seemed to me highly probable that the four birds might represent not characters in the play, not members of a band, not actual members of the chorus proper, but special dancers. A suggestion to that same effect, made from the floor of this association by Professor Alfred C. Schlesinger, during discussion of Professor Blake's paper, confirmed me in my opinion. A letter from Professor Schlesinger says, in part, "My question at the Hartford meeting was entirely a random shot. It just occurred to me at the moment that, since Aristophanes used the tree 'Carcinoi' in the finale of the *Wasps*, he might have used specialty dancers in the *Birds*". I believe that Professor Schlesinger has hit upon the true explanation of the four birds; and I believe that, with what we know of the Greek dance, we can even hazard a reasonable conjecture as to what the dances were which they performed as "specialties".

The first of the four birds (lines 266-273) is evidently a gorgeous sight. He is strikingly beautiful, and he is crested (291). Peisthetaerus exclaims over his flaming red color; whereupon the Hoopoe volunteers the remark that his name is *φοινικόπτερος*.

Aristophanes, of course, delights in puns. If this crested bird in fiery plumage is actually a specialty dancer, the Athenian audience would at once see his connection with crested "fire dance" par excellence, the *πυρρίχη*.

The Pyrrhic dance of the Greeks is usually connected by ancient writers with the armed dances of the Curetes, which Lucian (*Salt.* 8) and others speak of as the first dances in the world. The Curetes, we recall, are said to have performed around the infant Zeus a wild, noisy, leaping dance, in which they shouted lustily, and beat their swords against their shields. The Curetes may well have been an actual tribe or subdivision of the Cretan people; furthermore, this particular tribe may indeed have had a distinctive dance, from very early in its history. Now, a leaping dance, accompanied by as much noise at the dancers can possibly make, is common among many primitive peoples, in all parts of the world. It is not essentially a war dance, but

rather a noise-making dance. Dances of this sort are often used by an agricultural people, for two purposes: (1) to quicken the growing force in nature by restless activity, and thereby to induce fertility in crops, the high leaps serving as sympathetic magic to produce tall stalks of grain; and (2) to frighten away evil spirits with as loud and startling sounds as the dancers can make. It was, then, a magic and apotropaic dance.

It is evident that the Greeks ultimately fell heir to this Cretan dance. Obviously they associated the high leaps of the dancers with tongues of flame, shooting into the air; for they named it the Pyrrhic dance, from *πύρ*, “fire”. In later times the significance of the name had become somewhat obscured and we find in Greek literature numerous attempts to explain it as derived from the name Pyrrhus or Pyrrhichus. (5) However, at no time is the true significance, *από του διάπυρον είναι* (Hesychius, s.v.; cf. Et. Mag., s.v.), completely lost. A variant is an association with the funeral pyre (Schol. Pind. *Pyth.* 2.127).

In the days of Aristophanes, the Pyrrhic dance had become a solemn, dignified performance, a mimetic combat dance of great importance both in ritual and in the training of young soldiers. Its dignity, however, would not save it from burlesque treatment at the hands of Aristophanes—witness the travesty of *emmeleia* in *Wasps* 1482-1537.

It is within the bounds of possibility, then, that the first of the four birds could be a burlesque of a Pyrrhic dancer. What of the second?

Following the *φοινικόπτερος* comes (274-278) a “delicately-stepping” (*ἀβροβάτης*) (6) bird from a far-off land, whom the Hoopoe identifies as “the Median bird”—i.e., the cock, (7) elsewhere (*Birds* 483-487, 707) called “the Persian bird”. There is clear evidence in Aristophanes himself (*Wasps* 1490) for a “cock” dance. It was evidently very old, even in the fifth century (cf. *Wasps* 1479). It had been used in the drama by Phrynichus and apparently by Thespis as well. It seems to have been strongly mimetic, in the manner of primitive animal dances the world over. In the *Wasps* (1490) Aristophanes mentions particularly a crouching *schema* as being characteristic.

There is even more abundant evidence for a “Persian” dance. Athenaeus, quoting Duris, tells us (10.434e, f) that all Persians learn to dance, just as they learn to ride horseback; and that they practice dancing to develop physical strength. He says further that at one of the festivals in honor of Mithra, the king himself becomes intoxicated and dances “the Persian”. Elsewhere (10.629d) Athenaeus includes the Persian dance in a list of dances which are *στασιμώτερα καί ποικιλώτερα καί τήν ὄρχησιν ἀπλουστέραν ἔχοντα*. Xenophon, in the *Cyropaedia* (8.4.12), tells a story the full point of which we do not get, but which is interesting, nevertheless. Hystaspas, he recounts, asked his companions at a dinner party how he should demonstrate his joy at the king’s good fortune; should he clap his hands, he inquires and laugh? Artabazus replies, *ὀρχεῖσθαι δεῖ τό Περσικόν* whereupon there is a general laugh. The same author, in the *Anabasis* (6.1.9-10), tells of a performer carrying two wicker shields, who danced “the Persian”; he clashed his shields together, says Xenophon, and alternately squatted down (*ὠκλαζε*) and stood up again in time to the music of the

flute. Aristophanes himself, in *Thesmophoriazusae* 1175, mentions a flute air to accompany a Persian dance; the connotation there is of a lascivious dance. Pollux (4.100) specifically says that the Persian dance mentioned in this passage in Aristophanes is the one also named the *όκλασμα*; and he calls it *σύντονον* and *ύγράν*. Meursius (8) thinks that only one dance is designated by the two words *όκλασμα* and *περσική*- the squatting dance described by Xenophon; that the particular name of the dance was *όκλασμα*; and that it came to be called the “Persian dance” because it was one of the dances native to the Persians. There were certainly other Persian dances; but this one must have been distinctive.

Aristophanes, as we know, was fond of ludicrous combinations. In the second of the “four birds”, then, it would be quite possible to see a dancer who performed a cock dance or a Persian dance, or even a combination of the two, with exaggerated use of the squatting or crouching common to both.

The third bird (278-286), grandson of the Hoopoe, is in bad plight. His feathers are straggly and scanty, for he has been “plucked” by women and by informers. He is likened to Callias, a notorious spendthrift and rake. *Καλλίας αρ’ ούτος ούρνις έστιν* exclaims Euelpides. The emphatic position of *Καλλίας* is at once evident. It seems hardly a coincidence that among the particularly indecent dances the names of which have come down to us is one called the *καλλίβας* (Hesychius, s.v. *καλλίβαντης*). It is not impossible, then, that the third in our series may have been a *καλλίβας* dancer.

The fourth bird (287-290), a *βαπτός ορνις*, turns out to be a newfangled creature called a *κατωφαγάς*-a “gobbler” of some sort or other. He is at once associated by Euelpides with the glutton Cleonymus. Here again, by a striking coincidence, there appears a connection with the dance: *for from early times until the end of their history the Greeks had various “eating” or “swallowing” dances and figures. If Strabo (10.3.11 [468]) is correct, the ancient dance of the Curetes included a mimetic portrayal of Cronus swallowing his offspring. At the other end of the life span of the Greek dance, we have a pantomime performance called Κρόνου τεκνοφαγία* (Lucian, Salt. 80), and one called *Κύκλωφ* (Horace, Serm. 1.5.63; Ep.2.2.125), both of which certainly made use of the devouring motif. In the famous burlesque passage at the end of Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, Philocleon, performing “old dances” and challenged by the son of Carcinus, says his rival will be “swallowed” (1502; cf. 1506). Athenaeus (7.275c, d) mentions an “eating festival” the *Φαγησία*, the exact significance of which is obscure, but which might possibly have something to do with eating dances. The same author (4.134c), quoting Alexis, recounts how at a dinner party the diners, looking forward to dancing after the feast, took the names of various foods- *όψων*, *κάραβος*, *κωβίός*, *σεμίδαλις*; was the proposed dance perhaps a sort of *όψοφάγος*? This very word is in fact applied to the schema, or mimetic figure, denoting “one eating” as portrayed by Theophrastus (Athenaeus 1.21b). A passage in Herodotus (3.48.2) mentions a dance of youths and maidens on Samos, in which honey and sesame cakes were carried, “so that the children might snatch them and have food”. This suggests the numerous “food-snatching” or “food-stealing” dances and rituals mentioned by many writers. Athenaeus, for example (14.629f), lists a “meat-stealing” dance among those of a humorous nature. Xenophon (Lac. 2.9) tells of a Spartan ritual in which boys snatched cheeses sacred to Orthia, and if caught were

ceremonially beaten.(9) Pollux (4.104-105) mentions a *μιμητική*, in which the dancers mimicked persons caught stealing food, and Hesychius (s.v. *κλωπεία*) speaks of a “theft dance”, both of which probably refer to the same thing. Performers of the famous Rhodian swallow dance (Athenaeus 8.360b), dressed as birds, demanded fruit, wine, cheese, and bread of their patrons, and threatened to snatch it if it were not given them freely. The food-stealing theme was a favorite one among the Spartan comic actors known as *δεικηλισταί*. (10) Representations of the food-stealing dance or performance are seen by scholars on a seventh century Corinthian aryballos in the British Museum(A 1437) (11) on a sixth-century Corinthian crater in the Louvre (E 632) ; (12) and on numerous other vases, especially those bearing phlyakes scenes. Certainly theft in and of itself has some ritual importance; Rose (13) regards it as “part of a beneficent charm”. Food-stealing dances are probably the remnants of rituals which go back to remote prehistoric times.

The four birds mentioned in the *Birds* of Aristophanes, 266-293, then, may well be four specialty dancers. The words applied to each of them tie in rather strikingly with the outstanding characteristics of certain dance of great antiquity and of distinctive appearance- the Pyrrhic dance, the cock and Persian dances, the *καλλιβάς*, and a swallowing dance. It may be conjectured from the few lines devoted to each bird that the performance was in every case an incidental and brief one, with emphasis upon hilarious travesty rather than upon accuracy of steps; and that it did not obtrude too much the rapid flow of Aristophanes’ wit, nor slow up too much the action of the play.

### Footnotes

1. On Dec. 30, 1941, at Hartford, Conn., Professor Blake’s paper, “The Aristophanic Bird-Chorus, A Riddle” summarized the more important explanations of the problem which have been offered. The paper has appeared in *AJPh* 64 (1943)87-91.
2. W. W. Merry, Aristophanes, *The Birds* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1904), Notes, p. 19
3. A. E. Haigh, *The Attic Theatre* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1907), 270-271; 302
4. Aristophanes, with the English Translation of Benjamin Bickley Rogers (London Wm. Heinemann; New York, G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1930), Vol. 2.152
5. Lucian, *Salt.* 9; Schol. *Pind. Pyth.* 2.127; Proclus, 246; Hesychius, s.v. *πυρρίχη*; Pollux 4.99; Athenaeus 14.630e, f; Strabo 10.467
6. Reisig’s emendation for *ὄρρειβάτης*.
7. Cf. Hesychius, s.v. *Μηδικοί ὄρνεις* and *Περσικός ὄρνις*.
8. Johannes Meursius, “Orchestra”, in Vol. 8 of Jacobus Gronovius’ *Thesaurus Graecarum Antiquitatum* (Venice, Typis Bartholomaiei Javarina, 1732-37), s.v. *ὄκλασμα*, and also s.v. *περσική*.
9. Cf. Plato, *Laws* 1.633b; Plutarch, *Arist.* 17
10. Athenaeus 14.621d; A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb, Tragedy, and Comedy* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1927), 229-230, 253-259, 268-277; Heinz Schnabel, *Kordax* (Munich, Beck, 1910), 49-54
11. Marcelle A. Hincks, “Le kordax dans le culte de Dionysos”, *RA* IV. Série, 17 (1911) 1-5

