

Halfway between Gilbert Murray and T.S. Eliot:  
Elizabeth Bishop's Unpublished Translation of Aristophanes' *Birds*

*Chorus of Birds:*  
*Dusky bird and bird of gold,*  
*Of all the birds the one I hold*  
*Most dear, the one to whom belongs*  
*The very source of all birds' songs,*  
*Nightingale, come now and bear*  
*Delight upon the heavy air.*  
*Fair-throated, strike the little strings*  
*Of song till every accent sings.*  
*As in the spring, the melody*  
*Begin! Begin the song for me.*

The singers of these lines are those familiar inhabitants of Aristophanes' avian territory between Earth and Mt. Olympus known as "Nephelococcygia"/ "Cloudcuckooland." They are calling upon their mistress Nightingale to join them in the song that comprises the parabasis of *Birds*. What makes this English version of their invitation interesting and important is that it is a sampling of an otherwise unpublished translation of *Birds* by esteemed American poet, Elizabeth Bishop. Though only these ten lines of the kommatation and thirteen of the parabasis proper have been published, Bishop's translation of Aristophanes' *Birds* comprises the longest continuous poetic undertaking of her surviving corpus. It is of interest also because a translation of Greek drama is not the kind of product expected by students and scholars of Bishop whose modernist poetics eschewed all classical reference in her original poems.

For this reason, among others, it has been overlooked. Thirdly, Bishop's *Birds* is noteworthy as one of the earliest attempts to create an English translation of Attic comedy committed to both the metrical diversity of its ancient original and sensitivity to modern taste and idiom: "halfway between Gilbert Murray and T.S. Eliot."

The first goal of this paper is to bring to public awareness the existence of Bishop's translation with a description of its dimensions and qualities. A short PowerPoint presentation amplifies this description. Secondly, my paper outlines the biographical context in which Bishop wrote her translation to show that, modernist standards notwithstanding, her studies and interest in the ancient languages were of long standing, underlay her own growth as a poet and were what she believed, as poet, critic and teacher, to be essential training for one who seeks to be a poet.