

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Thesmophoriazusae. 411 B.C.E.

Aristophanes

Story

The major blocks of conflict and energy, in the present play, make us wonder whether we have enough of this playwright's work, to grasp it as a whole. The eleven plays that remain to us suggest several lines of dramatic theme: the critique of Athenian society, with stress on politics, greed, corruption; the theme of war, and of the much sought for Lady Peace (Cf. *The Knights* and *Peace*); literary-cultural critique, such as we find it in *The Thesmophoriazusae* or *Frogs*. And even that hint of a broad view, of the directions of Euripides' dramas, leaves out such fascinating utopianism as we find it in *The Birds*, or such critique of social culture as we see it in *The Clouds*.

The present play in itself touches more than a single register of Aristophanes' mind. There is first of all the engagement with Euripides, the prolific tragedian master dramatist whom Aristophanes frequently rags, emulates, or admires. Then there is the issue of women power, heavily interlaced with sexual power, which we find in *Lysistrata*. Then of course there is the feminist tone, so sharply accented in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, that taps into a growing modernization of the Athenian culture into which Aristophanes' own life was rapidly developing. It was a life in which Wars, Sophism, and great advances in the arts were slowly by passing the aging world of traditional ceremonies and rites—the Thesmophoria belonged to that world—which were vanishing in the rear view mirror of a tremendously dynamic century.

In the *Thesmophoriazusae* Euripides occupies center stage. That last of the major tragedians, himself alert to the changing trends of contemporary theater, is worried about his personal safety, especially during the period of the Thesmophoria festival, a woman's festival held over a period of four days every fall, and dedicated to the winter-fall fertility cycles associated with Demeter and Persephone. It seems that the women of Athens, increasingly sensitized to their power and value—we are in the same year as the first performance of the *Lysistrata*—are deeply angered by Euripides' uncomplimentary portrayals of women, in his dramas. Euripides decides to ask his elderly relative, Mnesilochus, to make a sally, in disguise, to speak on his behalf at the women's Festival. The idea is to test the waters, see how the women are feeling, and find out whether he, Euripides, is truly in danger. It does not go well for the old man spy. In fact as the play develops, the danger seems more to Mnesylochos than to Euripides.

Mnesylochos borrows women's clothing from a well known gay about town, the poet Agathon, has himself shaved to the last hair, and slips into a crocus yellow see-through gown. Mnesylochos arrives at the Festival, to find the women highly organized and programmed as they had been on the Acropolis, in the *Lysistrata*; he finds himself swamped by a series of Anti-Euripides speeches, vitriol dashed over those portrayals of women—like Phaedra or Medea—through whom Euripides loves to take out his spite against the fair sex. Mnesylochos joins the set of complaints, regaling the assembled ladies with tales of (her) (his) own marital escapades with handsome young guys. It is at this point that the proceedings are interrupted by the arrival of a well known Athenian homosexual, known to the assembled women as the Athenian 'ambassador to women.' He brings the alarming rumor that some man has penetrated the women's ceremony, and is currently in their midst, working as a spy.

Mnesilochos is suspected, captured, stripped, and, the truth of his presence now known, taken under heavy police custody—farical of course—until Euripides arrives to rescue him. In dialogue with Mnesilochos, Euripides and the 'spy' enact various pro-woman scenes from Euripides' work, until Euripides himself appears on the open stage, promises good treatment to women in his future work, and sets Mnesilochos free.

Themes

Slapstick. Slapstick appears at its most overblown in this play of Aristophanes, who delights in pushing his limits. When Mnesilochos is stripped, revealed as a spy, he becomes desperate, and grabs a hostage at knife point. The hostage, the new baby of the prosecutor Micca, turns out to be a wineskin stuffed with straw and fitted out with booties. The audience roars.

Literature. Dramatic texts are the theme of the play, this time, and not corruption, war, or even the politics of withdrawal, as in *Lysistrata*. We are immersed in examples from the work of Euripides, and have to imagine how different Aristophanes' audience-culture was from our own.

Homosexuality. Homosexuality is no taboo topic, either to Aristophanic comedy, or to the reality of fifth century Athenian culture. We see the topic amply joked at in any number of comedies, and learn to take it as an effective factor in many a comic routine. However flagrant gay styles—like that of Agathon or Cleisthenes, in the present play—come in for pretty nasty ridicule.

Characters

Mnesilochos, elderly relative of Euripides
Euripides, the tragic poet
Servant, of Agathon
Agathon, tragic poet
Crytilla, rough old woman
Mica, wife of Cleonymus
Wreath seller, from the marketplace
Cleisthenes, professional informer
Prefect, Athenian magistrate
Archer policeman, a Scythian
Echo, a teenage girl
Chorus, women celebrating the Festival of Thesmophoria

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Mnesilochos The elderly relative of Euripides, allows himself to be drawn onto Euripides' side, and acts as a spy from within the ranks of the women celebrating the Thesmophoria. He makes a 'manly' effort to describe his own housewife escapades—and to put himself in the good graces of the women. Betrayed by Cleisthenes, as a spy in disguise, he does his best to engage in some drama bits with Euripides, in order to prove his sympathy for women. In the end, with the help of Euripides, he makes a hairsbreadth escape from the festival. He is a good sport, and takes it as it comes.

Dress up. Mnesilochos throws himself into the dress up party. But there's a false ring, a masculine rasp. And it catches up with him.

Judicial. Mnesilochos sticks up courageously for Euripides, and refuses to buy into the women's attack on the playwright's portrayal of women.

Perceptive. Mnesilochos is the one who perceives that the 'baby' Mica is carrying is just a wine filled container, from which the momma can fulfill her own tippler's needs.

Versatile. Mnesilochos is flexible enough to participate in the bits of Euripidean drama, which enter the play as evidence for Euripides' respect for women.

Parallels. The role reversal, between men and women, is as old as the hills, but allows for such a rich development of accents and tones, that it just can't seem to die. In 1937 the cartoonist Al Capp gave birth to Sadie Hawkins day, on which every gal was free to choose her mate and drag him away into captivity. For decades, as Americans grew more fascinated with the war between the sexes, James Thurber

familiarized readers of *The New Yorker* with the passions, weaknesses, and absurdities of both sexes, as they negotiated the minefields of their relations to one another. That all was not humor and irony, in this perpetual pairing off, a good reading of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) should sufficiently dissuade us.

Discussion Questions

Greek tragedy and Greek comedy grew up side by side, throughout the fifth century. Are there sympathetic portraits of women in the tragedies of the period? Are there indicators of an ancient 'war between the sexes,' or is the whole bias of culture so 'male' that the 'war' never even gets declared?

Is Aristophanes mocking Euripides, when he introduces this competitor presenting his own lines? Or is he not genuinely calling Euripides to the support and assistance of the women? How do you explain the change of Aristophanes' interest, from war and suffering to literature itself?

Are there traces of what we might call 'romantic love' in Aristophanes' studies of the relations between the sexes? Would the relation of Cinesias and Myrrhine, in *Lysistrata*, give us a glimpse into a 'real life' marriage in Athenian society?