

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Themes in Aristophanes **PATRIARCHY**

**Overview.** It may seem a truism that the cultures of the Greco Roman world are patriarchies, in which economies, armies, even the arts are largely under the control of men. The very power of the father is embedded in the word *patriarchy*; all that flows from paternalism, and that Freud puts at the active center of society, seems rooted in the attitudes and empowerments of the father. And while it is true that the reign of father has in our own times been the subject of many a good laugh—John Irving’s *The World According to Garp*, the film *Mr. Mom*—and while the fight for the transgender promises to realign some sexual-cultural thought-habits, in the industrial west, the mythos of the father still shapes nations and their economies, even in an age of pandemic, which has us all redefined as point zero.

For all this stereotyping about patriarchy, however, it is worth noting that the ancient Hellenes took their own path, in this gender issue as well as elsewhere. Greek drama swarms with women who are of governing power —Clytemnestra, Cassandra, Electra, Medea, Phaedra, to start on the list—and in the work of a dramatist like Aristophanes exercises palpable force inside polis- societies. Patriarchy, in Aristophanes, is a background theme, but one moderated, at many turns, by the influence of the female. Madame may in fact have spent her days in the inner cubiculum of her city home, but have no doubt, from representations in literature, that Madame also knows how to think, kill, and re envision the state.

**Wasps.** Lovecleon is a father of his family, who has gone to seed. Like many retired gents of his age he has opted to spend his golden years working in the law courts, judging the cases that come up for judgment in the Athenian polis, and making a modest three obols a day, to take home to the family. He is tightly bonded with his male retiree group, used to dictating morals and domestic practices to the family, and also determined to cut up in his own way when he is out to dinner with the boys. He trots down the street, after a jolly dinner party, with a couple of dancing girls on his arm. So addictive is his behavioral drift toward his law court buddies, that he must be restrained to carrying out his own law cases, at home, between contesting house dogs.

**Clouds.** Strepsiades, like Dicaeopolis in *The Acharnians*, is a classical countryman patriarch; honest, grumpy, and sick of being pushed around by the economy, the system, or by corrupt politicians. Strepsiades is constantly blindsided by both his wife and his lazy son, who bets on the horses; and so as patriarch, of a sort, Strepsiades starts looking for a way to make some money. This quest leads him to the door of a certain Socrates, who runs a mini think tank, in which he teaches—as a good Sophist should—how to make bad reasoning seem to be good reasoning, and how clever thought-trickery can pay off bills and make more of the green stuff. In the end it is the son who makes his way to Socrates’ secrets, and gives his dad a good thrashing; leaving the old man wondering why he hadn’t brought up a son who rejects the idea of making good reasoning out of bad. As in the *Wasps*, dad wields the power, makes central family decisions, but is in the end made the butt of the cultural joke, for having thought that he could dominate all those around him.

**Ecclesiazusae.** Aristophanes respects the vagaries of the citizen male, though in such plays as *The Ecclesiazusae*, in which the men of the household are allowed to sleep in while their wives prepare a political revolution, the men come off as inactive, self-interested, and a little comical. They are the little men of the assembly, content to repeat the legal and behavioral patterns of their ancestors, satisfied with the status quo, because it is advantageous to them. As we see from *The Peace* or *The Birds*, some men of the polis are capable of innovative behavior, say in the service of peace and fresh life, but the majority are as chicken as Euripides when faced with the ire of the ladies.