

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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Themes in Aristophanes

POWER

Preface It is tempting to think of power, in ancient Greek culture, as firmly under the control of men. What we know of the earliest Greek literature—and from archeological investigations of domestic housing in Greek antiquity— suggests that women were by and large homebodies, tending to food preparation, house organization, and of course children. If we turn to evidence from literature and myth we find that women—think of Hecuba, Andromache, Penelope— are bearers of dignity and social power in their Homeric social worlds, while literary women like Sappho, with her coterie of sensitives, amply illustrate the formative possibilities for women in fifth century literary culture. Women in myth furnish examples of the highest social participation; Artemis, Athena, and the mythical Eurydice stirring our imaginations over elegance in life, death, and order. To all of which, if we wish, we may also add dramatic literary power, for literature (like *Medea*) or myth (like that around Hera) can take us to crises of toughness in which no man would care to end up on the wrong side.

Thesmophoriazusaē Two of Aristophanes' most intimately woman-centered plays—the *Ecclesiazusaē* and the *Thesmophoriazusaē*—deal with cults special to women, in which the creativity (and procreativity) of women is celebrated, and attitudes distinctively female are aired and tested. In the *Thesmophoriazusaē* the women of Athens are tested and defend their tastes in literature—the reference is uniquely to stage drama, and their live streamed opinionating, concerning which authors women can trust and value comes down to Euripides, but with a big caveat for those plays— *Medea*, *Phaedra*—in which women are maligned and devalued. In the play before us, the women are flexing a strong warning at Euripides, that he should not portray women in general with the weaknesses of the most vicious among them.

Lysistrata. We will see that the women of Athens can drive a poet to terror. (We are about to see the way those same women can overturn the state itself.) In the *Ecclesiazusaē* Euripides is afraid of women's words and actions, and knows that they have threatened him to death, if he continues to malign them. In the play before us, Lysistrata can harness that same kind of woman-power, threatening her (and her colleagues' menfolk) that she will promote a city-wide embargo on sex, until men agree to end the war. While in the *Lysistrata* power is exercised to stop the fighting, in the *Thesmophoriazusaē* the women level threats against the dramatist and Euripides, if he won't stop maligning them. In both instances—in both the *Thesmophoriazusaē* and the *Ecclesiazusaē*—we startle ourselves with the hollowness of the cliché that ascribes power primarily to men. In our third example, following, we see that women can contemplate so vast a power control as to play with the idea of overthrowing the government.

Ecclesiazusaē. In the *Ecclesiazusaē*, we enter, with a group of male-disguised revolutionary housewives, into the assembly (*prytaneum*). (These housewives' fierce beards are their trademark, as they open and take over the day's assembly business.) While in the earlier Aristophanic play, *Lysistrata*, women gain control over the men's sexual needs, and show us how an equitable division of tasks, needs, and self-discipline is required, for the formation of an adult society, it seems finally that this playwright, keen always to intellectualize his world, is tossing out models, thought-provocations, capable of making us readjust and reshape our expectations.

In the present play, the women's actions are brainpowered by a rebellious and imaginative Directress, the housewife Praxagora, who organizes (as Lysistrata had done in the play of her name) a kind of experiment, mustering like-minded housewives, calling a town meeting early one morning, and putting in an early presence with her disguised 'guys,' to be followed, sleepily and confused, by their left-behind mates who have just risen—and wasted a lot of time looking for their clothes, which their wives have stolen. Scenes follow in which husbands, dressed partially in their wives' clothes—that was all they could find—assess both the morning's assembly and the new social regulations that seem already to have been

promulgated in advance of them. The power has already been applied, and women are in charge of the state.