

Humanities Institute
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Ecclesiazusae 391.B.C.E.

Aristophanes

Story

From the outset, in *The Acharnians* and *The Knights*, Aristophanes remains a sharp critic of his government, and of the male power holders whose greed and ambition drive them to ignore the little man or woman, and to undertake military adventures which are doomed from the start. As his thought develops, along with his critique of political machismo, Aristophanes becomes increasingly aware of the meaning of women as constructors of their society. He finds his way, in later plays like *Lysistrata*, *The Thesmophoriazusae*, or the *Ecclesiazusae*, to putting the female situation into the center of his social critique. Women become the instruments by which he can draw new blood from the failing androcracy, and promote utopian conceptions as ways of opening the political mind of his time.

Power. In both the *Thesmophoriazusae* and the *Ecclesiazusae* we are taken inside the centers of female power. In the former play we enter a traditional cultural assembly of Athenian women who gather and declare themselves foes of Euripides, whose plays (*Medea*, *Hippolytus*), degrade women. In the *Ecclesiazusae*, 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.) In an earlier 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. While at first we might think, that Aristophanes is making quasi anthropological suggestions, in these women-power plays, that he is entertaining real world possibilities, 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. (Aristophanes' thinking might, incidentally, be real world thinking, for in certain cultures, like the Urhobo of southern Nigeria, women power has traditionally proven keenly effective in shaming shameless behaviors, in reinforcing calls for female-related justice or equity.)

Plan. In the present play, the women's actions are brain powered 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.

Social regulations. We share the scene in which Praxagora explains to her husband the way things are heading in the new revolutionary society. Women will take over the assembly, banning all private wealth, and guaranteeing equal pay for all. Men and women will be free to sleep with anyone they like, though only after they have first slept with uglier members of the opposite sex. House walls will be knocked down, so that all people live in a communal space, and all citizens will dine in communal dining halls. Two scenes are showcased, in which the unfold of the new society is made vivid. From the outset there is some objection to this strenuous Communism; the classical objector, The Selfish Man, is first to express himself. He wants no part of a society in which the money he earns does not go into his own pocket. In a second vignette, a young woman emerges from her house for a date with a handsome young Epigenes, but before they can get started an old lady, citing the new laws, demands that Epigenes should make love to her first.

Themes

Communism Aristophanes is less a political theorist than a social observer and moralist. Certainly there is no sign, in the work remaining to us, that he would have been drawn to an anti-individualist, purely egalitarian society. On the other hand, Communism is just to his purpose, in arguing that a complete social overhaul is needed in Athens.

Mockery Aristophanes takes no end of pleasure in mocking the male animal, and his inability to create and maintain a lasting form of social organization. The guys in the present play seem like putty in the hands of their far more competent wives.

Grotesquerie Aristophanes gives his homogeneous social fabric a grotesque sub theme, by the institution of equality in sexual relations. The ugly and the old are not to be neglected in these relations, and are to get first shot at youngsters on their way into the mating game. Equal rights means equal rights.

Characters

Praxagora, An Athenian housewife
Madame A, neighbor of Praxagora
Madame B, neighbor of Praxagora
Blepyrus, husband of Praxagora
Neighbor, of Blepyrus
Chremes, citizen of Athens
Selfish man, devoid of public spirit
Reporter, a girl employed by Praxagora
First crone, old Athenian woman
Girl, living next door to Crone
Epigenes, a young man in love
Second crone, old Athenian woman
Third crone, old woman of Athens
Maid
Chorus, women of Athens

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Praxagora The main character is Praxagora, the enterprising Athenian housewife, who masterminds the revolutionary assembly during the women's festival of the Ecclesiazusae. Like Lysistrata, Praxagora is fed up with male incompetence and greed, and feels that the women's husbands are destroying their own society. She takes, therefore, the big risk of pretend-overthrowing the order of the state, addressing her followers about the new communist equality she is about to establish, and putting out there, as a thought-project, the idea of a differently structured society.

Militant. Praxagora is anxious, at the outset of the play, for her fellow sisters to arrive, and to head with her to the assembly. Lysistrata had been of the same mindset.

Impatient. Praxagora is impatient at the difficulty her dear militant colleagues have, in concentrating on their political mission. She shares this obsession with Lysistrata.

Peace. Like her ultimately impatient sisters, Praxagora longs (like Aristophanes, from the time of his first work), for peace and quiet.

Revolutionary. Praxagora aspires to a time when neighbors will live for neighbors, and mutual support will drive the machinery of society.

Parallels. Plato, a near neighbor in time to Aristophanes, also thought lengthily about the possibilities of the state, to shape and foster the lives of its citizens. In *The Republic* Plato comes down on the side of

harmony, order, and control, all underpinned by the inherent intelligibility built into the universe. Ancient cultures were regularly drawn into rethinking the nature of society. Saint Augustine, in *The City of God*, reworks Platonic social theory around the premise of a Heavenly Father.

Discussion questions

In the *Frogs*, it seemed that the demanding cultural imperative for Athens was to reintroduce to the Athenians the greatest of the poets of the past; Aeschylus came out on top in the contest, as a defender of the classical virtues. Why does Praxagora not have recourse to this same kind of literary savior, as she looks for a cure for the ills of her city?

Did Aristophanes share the political values Praxagora expounds? Or was he, so far as we can judge, an advocate of old world macho-based values? Should we say that he understood both sets of values, and was using plays like the present flight of imagination, in order to test his own sense of how the world works?

How well do the men handle the revolutionary challenge that meets them in the present play? Are they resistant, even hostile, or are they in fact willing to let the women take over the power? Is Aristophanes adding one more critique to his generally dubious attitude toward guys in society?