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Women at the Thesmophoria

THE ABSENCE OF POLITICS

Women at the Thesmophoria, in Greek *Thesmophoriazousai*, is one of the least political plays, even though it was produced at a time of political upheaval and uncertainty. In the summer of 411 unrest and dissatisfaction with the conduct of the war against Sparta led to a revolution in which democracy was abandoned. For a few months it was replaced by the oppressive regime of the Four Hundred, and then by the more moderate one of Five Thousand; the traditional democratic constitution was restored in 410. It is not absolutely certain at what date in this period *Women at the Thesmophoria* was performed. No *hypothesis* or scholium gives the date. Some scholars have assigned it to 410, in the time of the Five Thousand, but it is now generally agreed that it belongs to the Dionysia of 411.[1] It refers (804) to the defeat of an Athenian naval force commanded by Kharminos, which occurred in the winter of 412/11, but not to anything which can certainly be dated later; a comment about Councillors handing over their function (808–9) probably refers not to the establishment of the Four Hundred in the summer of 411, but simply to the Council's annual change of membership.[2] It also refers (1060) to Euripides' *Andromeda* as having been performed 'last year', and a scholiast (on *Frogs* 53) says that *Andromeda* was produced in the eighth year before *Frogs*; reckoned inclusively, the eighth year before 406/5 is 413/12.

So it seems that *Women at the Thesmophoria* was performed just two or three months before the Four Hundred took power. According to

[1] Cf. A. H. Sommerstein *JHS* 97 (1977) 112–26, A. Andrewes *HCT* 5.184–93, Hubbard *Mask* 187–99, 243–5, Sommerstein *Thesm.* 1–3.

[2] Cf. Croiset *Ar. and Pol. Parties* 146, Hubbard *Mask* 198 n. 112. For an alternative explanation of 808–9 see Sommerstein *Thesm.* ad loc.

Thucydides (8.65–6) the coup was preceded by a period of suspicion and fear, with some political assassinations. Yet the play makes little or no reference to this. There are two passages which have been thought to hint at it.[3] One is the opening of the meeting of the women's assembly. A woman delivers a curse which is a comic parody of the curse delivered at the beginning of meetings of the real Assembly, and the chorus then adds a song which repeats some of the same points in lyric form. Those cursed include anyone who plans to set up a tyranny (338–9) and any who seek to change around decrees and laws (361–2). If revolution was already expected, those phrases could have been taken to refer to the conspirators; yet it is much more likely that they are simply comic distortions of a traditional formula about tyranny and subversion which Aristophanes is mocking (just as he mocks a proclamation about tyranny in *Birds* 1074–5). The other passage occurs in a hymn to Athena: 'Appear, thou who hatest tyrants as is right' (1143–4). This could possibly have been taken as a call to protect Athens against the conspirators; yet it may be nothing more than routine praise of Athena as the goddess of democratic Athens. So it is not likely that Aristophanes intends any reference in this play to the difficult and dangerous political situation in the spring of 411. Possibly he thought it would be too risky to mention it, and avoided it deliberately. Yet that is not certain either, for he may have planned the play and written most of it before revolution was suspected. Perhaps the best conclusion is simply that on this occasion he did not want to write a political play.

The main theme is a clash between Euripides and the women of Athens. It was a standing joke that Euripides was hostile to women. This joke was probably not yet current in 425, since Aristophanes does not use it in the Euripides scene of *Akharnians*; but in 411 the audience is expected to be already familiar with it, for it occurs without explanation in *Lysistrata* 368–9. There is no reason to think that Euripides was a misogynist in real life. (He is said to have married twice.) Nor do his plays systematically attack women; they contain many sympathetic presentations of female characters. But it is a fact that he often gives a more penetrating analysis of their motives than the earlier tragedians had done, and shows women being led by love or other emotions into wrong conduct: for

[3] Cf. Dover *Ar. Comedy* 170–2, Sommerstein *Thesm.* 231–2 (on lines 1143–4).

example Medea, whose jealousy and anger at being deserted by Jason causes her to kill Jason's new wife and her own children, and Phaidra, who falls in love with her own stepson Hippolytos. So it is not altogether untrue that Euripides reveals some murky aspects of female psychology which had previously received little attention. This is a good enough reason for Aristophanes in a comedy to make the women regard Euripides as their enemy.

The play shows the women at their festival of the Thesmophoria plotting against Euripides, who gets an old relative to dress up as a woman and attend the festival to discover their plans. The old man, the 'hero' of the play, is a buffoonish character similar in some ways to Strepsiades or Philokleon. He is never named in the dialogue; he is just called a *kedestes* of Euripides. This word means a relative by marriage: brother-in-law, father-in-law, or son-in-law. He is called Mnesilokhos in the scholia, and sometimes also in the abbreviations of speakers' names in the margins of the only manuscript of the play; Mnesilokhos is said by late authorities to have been the name of Euripides' father-in-law.[4] It is possible that this information is true, and that Aristophanes did mean the character in his play to be Euripides' father-in-law named Mnesilokhos. But, if so, it is hard to see how the audience can have known that. It is safer to leave the character unnamed, and I shall call him simply the Relative.

SEXUAL AMBIGUITY

In the prologue Euripides, accompanied by his old Relative, goes to the house of Agathon the tragedian to ask for help.[5] In some ways this scene resembles the scene of *Akharnians* in which Dikaiopolis goes to the house of Euripides the tragedian to ask for help. In each case a slave appears first and then the tragedian himself; both speak or sing in a style which parodies the style of the real tragedian.

Agathon was over thirty years younger than Euripides, and had begun competing in the contests of tragedies only a few years ago; his first victory had been in 416. Thus he belonged to a new

[4] *Souda* ε 3695 and the anonymous *Life of Euripides*.

[5] For recent discussions of Aristophanes' presentation of Agathon see F. Muecke *CQ* 32 (1982) 41–55, M. L. Chirico *Parola del Passato* 45 (1990) 95–115, G. Stohn *Hermes* 121 (1993) 196–205.

generation of tragedians, but the surviving evidence does not really make clear what was novel about his plays.[6] In Aristophanes his music is mocked as 'soft' (fr. 178) and is compared to 'the paths of an ant' (*Thesm.* 100), whatever that means; no doubt the point was brought out in the music of the parodies of his songs (39–62, 101–29). The quotations which we have from his actual work are all very short, but some of them display a fondness for symmetrical verbal patterns (antithesis and chiasmus) such as:

Success attracts skill, skill attracts success.

(Agathon fr. 6)

Now if I speak the truth I shall not please,
And if I please I shall not speak the truth.

(Agathon fr. 12)

That this sort of thing was characteristic of Agathon is confirmed by Plato's *Symposium*, in which he appears and delivers a speech (194e–197e) containing many instances of parallel phrasing and rhyme, in the manner of Gorgias the rhetorician. So we can safely assume that in lines 198–9 we have a parody of this feature of Agathon's style, or perhaps even an actual quotation from one of his tragedies, which Aristophanes then mocks by adding some vulgar derision by the Relative.

AGATHON. It is not right by ingenuity
To bear mischance, but by passivity.
RELATIVE. And so, you bugger, you've become wide-arsed
Not just by speech, but by passivity!

(*Women at the Thesmophoria* 198–201)

This conjunction of rhyme and sex confronts us with the question: is Aristophanes mocking Agathon's poetry or his personality? The answer is complex. It is known from other sources that Agathon as a boy was loved by a man named Pausanias and that this erotic relationship continued after he had grown up.[7] In classical Athens the active partner in a homosexual relationship was not particularly

[6] The extant fragments and other evidence are in *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* 1 (ed. B. Snell, 1971) 155–68. For extended discussion see P. Lévêque *Agathon* (Paris 1955). On Aristophanes' parody of Agathon see Rau *Paratragodia* 98–114.

[7] Plato *Protagoras* 315e, *Symposium* 193c, Xenophon *Symposium* 8.32.

frowned on, but the younger or passive partner tended to be regarded with contempt, especially if already adult.[8] Aristophanes' jokes imply that Agathon has a naturally pretty and effeminate appearance, with a high-pitched voice (191–2); that he cultivates such an appearance deliberately (172), notably by shaving his beard, which was not the normal practice of Athenian men;[9] and that he enjoys passive homosexual intercourse (200, 206). In the play he is wearing woman's clothes, so that the Relative at first sight thinks he actually is a woman (97–8) but then comments on his strange mixture of masculine and feminine garments and attributes (134–43). Agathon's answer, however, is not that he has a natural desire to look like a woman (as an instinctive transvestite), but that his attire has a practical purpose.

AGATHON. The clothes I wear are suited to my thought.
A man who is a poet must adapt
His manners to the plays he needs to write.
So if the plays one writes are feminine,
Those are the ways the body must adopt.
RELATIVE. And ride on top, if you're composing *Phaidra*?[10]
AGATHON. But if the plays are masculine, one has
That quality already in the body.
What we don't have, we chase and imitate.[11]
RELATIVE. Well, when you write a satyr-play, call me;
I'll stand erect behind you to assist!
AGATHON. Besides, it isn't in good taste, to see
A poet rough and hairy. Just consider
Anakreon of Teos, Ibykos,
Alkaios, who gave seasoning to music:
They wore snoods in Ionian luxury.
And Phrynikhos[12]—you've heard him, I suppose—
Himself was lovely and wore lovely clothes,

[8] Cf. K. J. Dover *Greek Homosexuality* (London 1978) in general, and especially p. 144 on Agathon.

[9] Line 191 does refer to shaving of the beard, not of bodily hair, because it draws a contrast with the bearded Euripides (190); cf. also 33.

[10] Phaidra is regarded as the most notorious adulteress in tragedy; cf. *Thesm.* 497, 547–50, *Frogs* 1043, 1052.

[11] 'Imitation' (μίμησις) refers to dress and behaviour (τρόποι). It does not here have its Aristotelian sense of poetic representation.

[12] The early tragic dramatist, not the comic dramatist contemporary with Aristophanes.

And so that's why his plays were lovely too.
One's compositions must be like one's nature.
RELATIVE. So Philokles is foul and writes foul plays,
And Xenokles is bad and writes bad plays;
Theognis, too, is cold and writes cold plays!

(*Women at the Thesmophoria* 148–70)

Here Agathon offers three different justifications for his feminine dress, sliding almost imperceptibly from one to another. First he claims that he needs it in order to write a female role in a play. He must mean that adopting a woman's clothes and manners helps him to know what a woman would do and say. This is virtually the same idea as in *Akharnians* 410–13, where Euripides wears rags and lies on a couch when writing roles of cripples and beggars. Probably Aristophanes is mocking a theory that someone had actually propounded, arguing that a dramatist by physical imitation could feel his way into a character's natural speech and behaviour; there is, however, no other evidence for this theory in Aristophanes' time. Secondly Agathon points out that he is following a poets' tradition, because Ionian poets of the previous century customarily wore dress which looked effeminate and luxurious. Vase-paintings prove that Anakreon did wear clothes similar to those worn by Agathon in this scene.[13] It may be true that Agathon in real life affected this kind of attire in emulation of his Ionian predecessors, and that Aristophanes is mocking this.[14] But thirdly, after linking beauty of person, beauty of clothes, and beauty of plays in the case of Phrynikhos, Agathon refers to 'nature' (167); the feminine dress reflects his own nature, which is what makes his style of composition effeminate, just as, the Relative rudely remarks, the foul, bad, and frigid compositions of other poets match their respective natures. In strict logic these three explanations of Agathon's attire are incompatible. If he is trying to look like Anakreon, he is not trying to look like a woman; and if he is imitating feminine qualities which he does not possess (155–6), it is not true that those qualities are in his own nature (167). But Aristophanes blends the different explanations in such a way as to give a general impression of Agathon's effeminacy, both in personality and in poetic style. Probably there was some factual basis for the satire, but it is not possible for us to know just how effeminate the real Agathon and his poetry actually were.

[13] Cf. J. M. Snyder *Hermes* 102 (1974) 244–6.

[14] Compare W. S. Gilbert's mockery in *Patience* of the effeminate dress of 'aesthetes' in the late nineteenth century, who claimed to be imitating medieval predecessors.

The true facts are even more uncertain concerning the other 'womanish' man who appears in this play. Kleisthenes is the butt of jokes in many of Aristophanes' plays, but it is only in this one that he appears on-stage,[15] as the women's friend and representative among the men (574–6). From several of the jokes it is clear that he looked like a woman because he had no beard: when the Relative is shaved and sees himself in a mirror, he thinks he sees Kleisthenes (235). But there is no suggestion that Kleisthenes, like Agathon, shaved his beard deliberately, and it is more likely that it just did not grow naturally. Some of the jokes imply that his conduct is effeminate: he is engaged in weaving (*Birds* 831) and is available as a passive sexual partner (*Lysistrata* 1092, *Frogs* 57). We cannot tell whether these have any basis in fact. They may be simply comic inferences from his beardless face.[16]

Besides the womanish characters of Agathon and Kleisthenes, the Relative is dressed as a woman for much of the play, and so is Euripides briefly at the end. Thus sexual ambivalence and disguise are an important element of the play. Some critics have looked for a wider significance in this,[17] but its main purpose is surely to make the audience laugh at the characters' odd appearance. We have to visualize what they look like in the theatre. In the modern theatre a male actor playing a woman is generally funny. The traditional pantomime dame is the most obvious case: 'she' looks and sounds comic because a deep voice, long strides, and other male characteristics are incongruous in a female character. Modern readers sometimes assume that female characters in Aristophanes must have been funny likewise because they were played by male actors, but that is an error. In Athens men playing women were not exceptional, like the pantomime dame, but normal, in tragedy as well as comedy. Antigone, Elektra, Phaidra, Iphigeneia—they all spoke with male

[15] Kleisthenes does not appear on-stage at *Akharnians* 118. The character appearing there is a Persian eunuch, and the joke is that he looks just like Kleisthenes.

[16] Cf. Dover *Greek Homosexuality* 144–5.

[17] G. Paduano *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 40 (1982) 103–27, Taaffe *Ar. and Women* 74–102.

voices and had a male physique. So, when male actors appeared as women in *Lysistrata* and *Women at the Thesmophoria*, that was not in itself funny; it was perfectly normal. But a male actor playing a man dressed as a woman was funny, as is clear from Agathon and the Relative in this play. He did not look the same as a male actor playing a woman.

The difference lay in the mask. An actor wore a white mask to play a woman, a darker mask to play a man.[18] This reflected, or rather exaggerated, the normal conditions of ancient life, in which men were generally sunburnt because they spent much time out-of-doors whereas women lived mainly indoors. Normally a male mask would also have a beard. In *Women at the Thesmophoria* the actor playing Kleisthenes must wear a mask with no beard; but it is a dark mask, and he wears man's clothes, so that he is easily seen to be a man, and it is only the absence of a beard that looks incongruous. The actor playing Agathon, besides having no beard, wears woman's clothes. Does he also wear a white mask? He is called 'white' (191, cf. 31–2), but if he wore a white female mask the audience would be left with no visible indication that the character is really a man. Thus it seems more likely that his mask is simply pale, intermediate in colour between normal male and female masks.[19] When the Relative is dressed up as a woman, the beard is removed from his mask by some stage business (218–35), but he undoubtedly continues to wear the dark mask, and the combination of a dark face and feminine clothes give him an absurd appearance for all the rest of the play, becoming even more ludicrous when the feminine clothes are found to have a phallus underneath (643–8). At the end, when Euripides appears disguised as an old woman, there is no mention of shaving; perhaps he wears a cloth wrapped all round his head and chin, concealing the beard but leaving the forehead, eyes, and nose of the dark mask visible. Whatever the exact details, in all these characters it is the combination of male and female indicators which is grotesque and laughable.

[18] Cf. Stone *Costume* 22–7.

[19] Masks of this colour were probably used also for other male characters mocked for their pallor, such as the students in *Clouds* and Khairephon in *Wasps* 1412–14.

THE THESMOPHORIA

The Thesmophoria were an annual festival in honour of Demeter and her daughter (Kore or Pherephatta or Persephone), who on this occasion had the title *thesmophoros*. In antiquity this title was believed to mean 'bringing law', implying that the two goddesses were givers of civilization;[20] there is no strong reason to reject this interpretation, although modern scholars have proposed various others. The festival was held in the autumn, on 11, 12, and 13 Pyanopsion. The middle day was apparently the most important, and that is the day on which the action of the play takes place.[21] Many women probably attended on that day only; the Relative remarks on the crowd which can be seen going up to the temple on that day (280–1). But huts or tents are also mentioned (658, cf. 624), in which those attending the whole festival may have stayed at night.

The place of celebration was called the Thesmophorion, but there is doubt about its location. There are two main views. One is based on 657–8, where the women say they must search the whole Pnyx to see if a man has got in. From this it is inferred that the Thesmophorion was situated on the Pnyx hill, close to the normal meeting-place of the Assembly.[22] However, since the women in the play have been holding their own assembly, which Aristophanes has presented partly as a comic reflection of the real Assembly of men, it is possible that they are merely calling their meeting-place Pnyx in imitation of the real Assembly. If so, there is no evidence that the Thesmophorion was on the actual Pnyx, and Broneer has argued that it is more likely to have been in the precinct of the Eleusinion, which was the main centre for worship of Demeter and Kore in Athens, situated where the south-east corner of the Agora slopes up towards the Akropolis; or it may even be simply an alternative name for the whole Eleusinion, used on the occasion of the Thes-

[20] Kallimakhos *Hymn to Demeter* 18, Virgil *Aeneid* 4.58 with Servius ad loc.

[21] Lines 80 and 375 call it the middle day; 80 also calls it the third day. A scholiast explains that the Thesmophoria were celebrated on 10 Pyanopsion in the deme Halimous, so that the middle day of the celebration in Athens was the third day if the celebration at Halimous was counted in; cf. C. Austin *Dodone* 19 (1990) 15.

[22] This, the more widely held view, is best expounded by H. A. Thompson *Hesperia* 5 (1936) 151–200.

mophoria.[23] No archaeological evidence gives substantial support to either view.

The question is not unimportant for our understanding of the play. If the Thesmophorion was on the Pnyx hill, it must have been very small (for a large temple would have left archaeological traces) and the women cannot have met inside it but must have gathered in the meeting-place of the men's Assembly.[24] There will have been room there for thousands of women, and their proceedings, influenced by the formal setting of tiered seats, may have resembled an Assembly meeting in real life and not merely in Aristophanes' comic imagination. If, on the other hand, the Thesmophoria were celebrated at the Eleusinion, that precinct cannot have held more than a few hundred women. We know that each deme chose two women to be *arkhousai*, 'leaders', who (or some of whom, selected by lot) assisted in the ritual of the Thesmophoria; to be so chosen was an honour and a mark of respectability.[25] Perhaps only these women (about three hundred) customarily attended. If so, we should imagine the gathering at the festival not as an indiscriminate crowd of women of all classes, but as a relatively small and sedate meeting of respectable ladies, justifying the phrase 'well-born women' (330). In that case the notion of their holding an assembly meeting at the festival is not modelled on real life, but is a comic flight of fancy by Aristophanes. I am inclined to think this latter interpretation preferable, but I see no way of deciding the question for certain.

The plot of the play clearly implies that no men were allowed to attend the festival, and that the proceedings were secret from men. It is a joke that the beardless Kleisthenes is allowed in because he is the women's representative among the men, and even he is told to stand aside when the women become suspicious of the Relative and question 'her' about the secret rituals to check 'her' claim to have attended the festival every year.

[23] O. Broneer *Hesperia* 11 (1942) 250–74.

[24] This view is possibly supported by the fact that, on the only known occasion when the Assembly met on 11 Pyanopsion, the men met in the theatre, not on the Pnyx (*IG* 2² 1006.50–1). Was that because the Pnyx was occupied by the women on that day? The force of this evidence is doubtful, because it belongs to a later era (122 BC).

[25] Isaios 8.19–20, *IG* 2² 1184.

WOMAN [*to Kleisthenes*]. Let me; I'll question her on last year's rites.
But you must move away, please; you're a man
And mustn't overhear. [*To the Relative*] Now tell me, you,
Which of our rituals was first performed?
RELATIVE. Well now, which one was first? We had a drink.
WOMAN. And after that, what next?
RELATIVE. We drank a toast.
WOMAN. Well, someone's told you that. And what was third?
RELATIVE. Xenylla was caught short, and used a bowl.
WOMAN. What rubbish! Here, come back here, Kleisthenes!
This is the man.

(*Women at the Thesmophoria* 626–35)

Here, as in *Lysistrata*, we have the conventional joke that women drink whenever they get a chance; the Relative guesses that their main activity at the festival was drinking, and hilariously his guess turns out to be right. This is not evidence for the proceedings at the festival in real life. Although it was known that the women fasted (948–9, 984), it is not clear that Aristophanes otherwise knew what the proceedings really were. Modern scholars have tried to reconstruct the rituals of the Thesmophoria, using mainly evidence from later periods, much of it not Athenian, and to establish their 'meaning'.[26] Such investigation is not relevant here. Aristophanes is not trying to portray or interpret the real rituals. He has simply picked on the Thesmophoria as being a festival well known to be attended only by women and thus a good setting for his comic story of women protesting about Euripides.

He stages a feminized version of the proceedings in the real Assembly of men. First come prayers to various gods for the success of the meeting, and curses on those regarded as traitors to the community.[27] Some details of the joke elude us because we do not possess the wording of the prayers and curses in the real Assembly, but the main points seem to be two. The first is to mock the verbose rigmarole of the traditional wording, which evidently included a long list of gods and also some prohibitions which seemed to Ari-

[26] For two recent discussions see W. Burkert *Greek Religion* (trans. J. Raffan, Oxford 1985) 242–6, H. S. Versnel *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion* 2 (Leiden 1993) 228–88. An attempt to link the myth and rituals of the Thesmophoria to the play is made by Bowie *Aristophanes* 205–17.

[27] This passage (295–371) is analysed by J. A. Haldane *Philologus* 109 (1965) 39–46.

stophanes to be absurdly out-of-date, including curses on anyone who tried to make peace with Persia (hostilities with the Persians had ended around 449 BC) or to restore the tyrant (who was expelled in 510 BC). The second is to include feminine references throughout. In our era of sensitivity to gender in language this may seem to some readers to be perfectly proper, but to the Athenians it will have sounded ridiculous. This part of the joke involves changing 'the people of Athens' (the supreme authority in the democracy) into 'the people of women', and treating Euripides as an enemy alongside Persia. In these lines notice how the feminine words are mostly reserved for the beginning of a new line where, following a slight pause, they come with greater impact.

Pray to the gods, to the Olympians
And Olympianesses, to the Pythians
And Pythianesses, to the Delians
And Delianesses, and the other gods.[28]
Whoever makes a plot against the people
Of women, or sends out a herald to
Euripides and Persia to the harm
Of women, or aspires to tyranny
Or to restore the tyrant . . .

(*Women at the Thesmophoria* 331–9)

The curse goes on to list various kinds of traitor to women; I shall return to them in a moment. Next a resolution of the council of women is read out; its prescript is like that of a resolution of the real Council, but the proposer and officials mentioned in it have women's names, not men's. The resolution orders the holding of an assembly to discuss how Euripides should be punished, and the heraldess then opens the debate with the words traditional in the real Assembly, 'Who wishes to speak?' One woman steps forward, puts on a crown as speakers in the Assembly did, makes a speech which, at least at the start, parodies real politicians' speeches, and ends with an undertaking to draw up a written proposal in consultation with the secretaryess (432). Another woman delivers a shorter speech, and then the Relative makes his contribution. But at this stage the joke about the procedure of the Assembly gets forgotten. Instead there are jokes about women.

[28] The Pythian and Delian gods are those worshipped at Pytho (Delphi) and Delos.

WOMEN

Jokes about women are more fully developed in *Women at the Thesmophoria* than in either of the other two plays in which women are prominent, but they are mostly on the same two themes: wine and sex. Essentially they are men's jokes about women.[29]

Wine appears in the women's curse against their enemies at the start of their meeting: their enemies include wine-sellers who give short measure (347–8). The woman who makes the first speech complains that nowadays husbands, taught by Euripides to distrust their wives, lock up their stores of food and drink with keys and seals difficult to copy (418–28). The climax of the jokes about wine comes when the Relative, caught by the women, seizes the baby of one of them as a hostage and threatens to kill it if he is not released; the 'baby', when unwrapped from its clothes, turns out to be a wineskin full of wine, and as he plunges his knife into it the mother is desperate to catch its 'blood' in a bowl (689–762). Clearly it was a standing joke among men that women were constantly having drinks in secret. Perhaps some women did, but there is no evidence that alcoholism among women was actually commoner in ancient Athens than at any other time or place.

The sex jokes are not about marital intercourse between wives and husbands, but about wives having secret affairs with other men. Husbands bar and seal the women's rooms and keep dogs to scare lovers away (414–17). When they come home they look suspiciously at their wives and search the house for a hidden lover (395–406). Yet, says the Relative when disguised as a woman, 'we' are cunning enough to have lovers all the same.

RELATIVE. Well, not to mention anybody else,
I know the cunning things I've done myself.
The worst was three days after I was married.
My husband was in bed with me, and then
A friend who'd screwed me at the age of seven
Came scratching at the door for love of me.
I knew him straightaway, and crept downstairs.
My husband asked 'Where are you going?' 'Where?
I've such a colic pain, dear, in my stomach.
I'm going to the loo.' 'All right, go on.'

[29] On the women in this play see especially Taaffe *Ar. and Women* 74–102.

Then he mixed juniper and dill and sage,[30]
While I poured water on the hinge[31] and went
To meet my lover. That's when I was bonked
Beside Agyieus,[32] clinging to the bay-tree!

(*Women at the Thesmophoria* 476–89)

This story is an outrageous invention, told by a character who is not actually a woman at all. Of course the notion that wives are always having it off with lovers is comic overstatement. Yet Athens was a place where most marriages were arranged by a girl's father with a man who was often considerably older than she was. It may often have been the case that a young wife had no romantic feeling towards her husband, who therefore had some cause to suspect her. One real-life instance is well known: Euphiletos kept a careful eye on his wife until their child was born, and his trust in her even after that turned out to be unjustified.[33] So Aristophanes is humorously exaggerating what may have been a real problem in Athenian life.

The traitors cursed by the women include the woman-servant who introduces a lover to the wife and then tells the husband or who takes false messages between the wife and the lover, the deceitful lover who does not keep his promises, the old lady who pays a lover, and the courtesan who takes money and cheats a lover (340–6). They also include anyone who betrays a wife who smuggles a baby into the house (339–40). The first woman speaking at the meeting also complains at the difficulty of doing that (407–9); and the Relative, still disguised, tells another outrageous story about how it was once done.

RELATIVE. Another woman claimed to be in labour
For ten days, while she tried to buy a baby;
Her husband went round buying birth-inducers.
A woman brought the baby in a pot,
Its mouth stopped with a piece of honeycomb.
Then, when she tipped the wink, the wife called out
'Now leave me, husband, for the baby's coming!'
Because it kicked the belly—of the pot.

[30] Remedies for the gripes which he thinks his wife has.
[31] To prevent creaking, which would make the husband aware that his wife was going out.
[32] The altar and pillar of Apollo standing outside the house.
[33] Lysias 1.6–8.

He joyfully ran out, she pulled the comb
Out of the baby's mouth, and then it yelled.
The wicked hag that brought the baby in
Ran smiling to the husband and declared
'You've got a lion for a son, a lion!
Your spitting image—specially his cock!
It's just the same as yours, a pinecone shape!'

(*Women at the Thesmophoria* 502–16)

A modern reader naturally wonders why a wife might want to bring in a baby secretly and pass it off as her own. We get a clue from another assertion by the Relative, that a woman exchanged her own baby girl for a slave's baby boy (564–5). The explanation is that a husband generally wanted a son to be his heir, and if his wife failed to give birth to a son he might divorce her and marry someone else for this purpose. So a wife who had not produced a boy, and was desperate to avoid being discarded, might procure an unwanted male baby from a poor woman and pretend that it was hers.[34]

All these jokes about women are men's jokes. They are tales about the mischief that women get up to if one doesn't keep an eye on them: they are *always* trying to filch a drink, get off with a lover, or pretend they have done their job of producing a boy. None of these situations is presented with any real sympathy for the woman. The audience is not encouraged to think that women should be free to drink wine when they wish, or that it is hard on them to be thrust into an arranged marriage with an unloved husband, or that they should not feel threatened if no male baby is born. It is simply assumed that it is their duty in real life to conform to their husbands' requirements, but it is laughable in a comedy if they try to wriggle out of them. To a modern reader, especially a modern female reader, it all seems exceedingly patronizing.

There is just one passage in this play which at first sight appears to be a defence of women. But this impression is misleading, for Aristophanes here is sarcastic. It is the parabasis, in which the chorus, as often, speaks about its own character (785–829).[35] The women purport to praise themselves and show that they are superior

[34] Cf. J. F. Gardner *G&R* 36 (1989) 55–7.
[35] For different views of this parabasis see Moulton *Ar. Poetry* 127–35, Hubbard *Mask* 195–9, Taaffe *Ar. and Women* 76–8.

to men. If (they say) women are an evil, as you allege, why do you marry us? Why are you so keen to keep us in your houses? Why does every man gaze at a girl who shows herself at a window? Women's names imply that they are better than men; for example, Nausimakhe (meaning 'fighting with ships' and apparently a common woman's name)[36] is obviously better than Kharminos, who recently lost a naval battle! *These* people (the spectators in the theatre) are more often criminals than we are; and some of them throw away their weapons (spear and shield) whereas we preserve ours (loom and wool-basket). The whole passage is a sequence of comic paradoxes, mocking the Athenian audience, in much the same way as the chorus of *Clouds* boasts of its services to the Athenians (575–94) and the chorus of *Birds* tells them that they would be better off with wings (785–800). Just as in those plays Aristophanes is not saying seriously that clouds and birds are better than men, so also in the parabasis of *Women at the Thesmophoria* the argument that women are superior to men is intended to be laughable; every Athenian man knew perfectly well that women were inferior. There could hardly be plainer evidence that Aristophanes was addressing his play to a male audience.

EURIPIDES

The second half of the play consists almost entirely of the Relative's attempts to escape from the women. The ideas for escape come from plays of Euripides.

First, *Telephos*. The Relative seizes the baby of one of the women, runs to the altar with this hostage, and threatens to kill it if he is not released. Aristophanes must have in mind the seizure of the baby Orestes by Telephos, which he had already put to comic use in *Akharnians* (see pp. 56–7).[37] However, by now it was twenty-seven years since Euripides' *Telephos* was performed. Presumably many (say half) of the audience at *Women at the Thesmophoria* had not seen it, and those who had seen it might well have forgotten it. Aristophanes cannot assume that they will recognize the Euripidean

[36] If this seems to us a strange name for a woman, perhaps we should recall the lady named Trafalgar in Pinero's *Trelawny of the 'Wells'*.

[37] Cf. Rau *Paratragodia* 42–50.

origin of the device, and does not remind them of it; neither Euripides nor Telephos is named in this passage (689–762). Instead he makes it comic in itself: the 'baby' turns out to be a wineskin, so that the main point of the incident is mockery not of tragedy but of women's bibulousness.[38]

Second, *Palamedes*.[39] This was a more recent play of Euripides, performed in 415 BC. Thus many in the audience would remember it, and for the benefit of those who do not Aristophanes takes care to make the Relative say 'I know a device from *Palamedes*' (769–70). In that tragedy, the scholiast tells us, Oiax, brother of Palamedes, wanted to inform their father in Greece of the treacherous manner in which Palamedes had been put to death at Troy, and to keep the message secret he carved it on oars and cast them into the sea, hoping that one or other of them would be washed up on the Greek shore. We do not know why Euripides made Oiax employ this strange method of communication; presumably it was done off-stage and described in a speech. Aristophanes evidently thought it ludicrous. So the Relative looks around for oars on which to send a message to Euripides; at a temple he naturally fails to find any, and instead writes his message on votive tablets and casts them in all directions. The point of this is simply to mock a rather absurd passage in a tragedy.

Euripides does not respond to *Palamedes* ('He must be ashamed of it', 848), and the Relative wonders which other play will draw him. 'I know! I'll imitate his recent[40] *Helen*' (850). This makes clear to the audience that the next passage will be based on *Helen*, performed last year.[41] Many would have a general recollection of that play, but of course would not know the lines by heart. *Helen* is a play we still have; so in this case we can compare the two texts and see exactly how Aristophanes uses Euripides. He keeps some

[38] Aristophanes may have had *Telephos* in mind also in the Relative's speech in defence of Euripides (466–519), which at some points resembles Dikaiopolis' speech about the origin of the war (*Akharnians* 497–556); cf. p. 61 and Rau *Paratragodia* 38–40. But in this speech too he does not name *Telephos* and does not expect the audience necessarily to think of it.

[39] Cf. Rau *Paratragodia* 51–3.

[40] This word (καινήν) may imply 'newfangled'. For discussion of the novelties in *Helen*, which may have encouraged Aristophanes to make fun of it, see W. G. Arnott *Antichthon* 24 (1990) 1–18.

[41] On this parody see Rau *Paratragodia* 53–65.

lines verbatim, but he selects, abridges, simplifies, and adapts so as to make a brief but effective reminiscence of the tragedy. The Relative, who is still dressed as a woman, plays the role of Helen marooned in Egypt after the Trojan War, and Euripides arrives to play her husband Menelaos. The most hilarious feature of the scene is the incomprehension of the woman left by the others to guard the Relative, for example:

EURIPIDES. Who holdest sway within these mighty halls
To welcome strangers from the ocean swell,
Exhausted by the storm and wreck of ships?
RELATIVE. This Proteus' palace is.
WOMAN. What! Proteus's,
You utter wretch? By the Two Goddesses,
He's lying! Proteas died ten years ago.[42]
EURIPIDES. What country makes the landfall of our bark?
RELATIVE. Egypt.
EURIPIDES. Ah me, to what a place we've voyaged!
WOMAN. Do you believe the trash this scoundrel talks?
This place here is the Thesmophorion.

(*Women at the Thesmophoria* 871–80)

In *Helen* Menelaos succeeds in rescuing Helen from Egypt, but in *Women at the Thesmophoria* the scheme to emulate him fails when it is interrupted by one of the Prytaneis with a Skythian archer-policeman. Euripides flees, the Relative is tied up with his back to a board, and the Archer is left to guard him. But when the Archer leaves his post for a few minutes to fetch a mat to sit on, the Relative and Euripides launch into yet another Euripidean parody.

Andromeda had been performed in the previous year at the same festival as *Helen*, and so will have been equally fresh in the audience's mind. The text is not preserved, but a central feature of it was Andromeda chained to a rock on the shore and liable to be devoured by a sea-monster; Perseus then flew down with his winged sandals to rescue her.[43] The Relative fastened to a board (and still wearing

[42] Proteus was a mythical king of Egypt, but Proteas was an Athenian general at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War.

[43] For the fragments and reconstruction of this play see F. Bubel *Euripides: Andromeda* (Stuttgart 1991), R. Klimek-Winter *Andromedatragödien* (Stuttgart 1993) 55–315. On the parody see Rau *Paratragodia* 65–89.

woman's clothes) represents Andromeda fastened to a rock, and Euripides plays Perseus effecting a rescue. Although in this case we cannot compare the parody with the original, it seems to be more ambitious and varied than the previous one. The parody of *Helen* is based on the spoken lines only. The parody of *Andromeda* is partly musical. The Relative first sings an elaborate lament, which presumably guys the music as well as the words of a lament by Andromeda. Then follows a passage with Echo. Euripides' play must have had the nymph Echo heard from off-stage repeating words sung by Andromeda among the rocks. The device struck Aristophanes as ludicrous; so now he makes Euripides play Echo, first irritating the Relative by repeating whatever he says, and then creating utter bewilderment in the Archer, who rushes around trying to find the person who is flinging his own words back at him.[44] Only then does Euripides appear as Perseus, but the Archer is too stupid to appreciate the tragic references and chases him away, so that this rescue attempt fails too.

Finally Euripides abandons the idea of re-enacting his own plays, and offers to make peace with the women. If his Relative is released, he will not criticize them in future; but if they do not accept these terms, he will reveal their surreptitious activities to their husbands. They agree immediately, but point out that they do not control the Archer, whom Euripides himself must persuade. Euripides, now dressed as an old woman, produces a glamorous dancing-girl who absorbs the Archer's attention.[45] While the Archer is off-stage enjoying the girl, Euripides and the Relative make their escape, and the play ends with the chorus sending the Archer off in pursuit in the wrong direction.

The comic logic underlying these scenes of parody is as follows. The Relative, having been captured by the women, wants to get

[44] Heath *Political Comedy* 51 n. 106 and Sommerstein *Thesm.* 226–7 (on lines 1056–97) think that Echo is not played by Euripides; but who else would be participating in this parody of *Andromeda*? Their error arises from their belief that Echo appears on-stage. She does not; in 1083–97 the Archer becomes frantic because he cannot see her. Aristophanes is making fun of the use of an invisible character in *Andromeda*, but Heath's and Sommerstein's interpretation destroys the joke.

[45] The suggestion of E. Bobrick *Arethusa* 24 (1991) 67–76, that this device is inspired by Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, seems to me far-fetched. Sexual temptation is a comic method of influencing a man; cf. *Frogs* 513–20, and of course the main theme of *Lysistrata*.

Euripides to come and rescue him, as he promised he would if necessary (269–76). So he wants to communicate to Euripides the fact that he is a prisoner, and he thinks that the way to attract Euripides' attention is by imitating a Euripidean character. The imitation of *Palamedes* fails, but the imitation of *Helen* succeeds in getting Euripides to come. But then there is the second problem of how Euripides is to rescue the Relative from his guards (first the Woman, afterwards the Archer). The comic idea is that he will use the same methods as he used last year, in this same theatre, for the rescue of Helen and Andromeda. But these methods fail, because the successive guards are too hostile or too stupid to join in the dramatic illusion as the audience at a tragedy should. When the devices of tragedy fail, Euripides resorts in the end to a phallic scheme more appropriate to comedy.

Critics have wondered whether all this is intended to be a satirical attack on Euripides or not. Hansen, for example, writes of 'the supposed failure of Agathon and Euripides as tragic poets',[46] whereas Murray says 'it is difficult to see how Euripides can have regarded the *Thesmophoriazusae* as anything but a tremendous compliment'.[47] Murray is surely right to distinguish the treatment of Euripides in this play from the treatment of Agathon; Agathon is ridiculed for his effeminacy, but there is no suggestion that Euripides is effeminate. Nor is there really any implication that his tragedies are failures, as tragedies. What they fail to do is to resolve a comic problem; for that a comic solution is required. The humour of these scenes arises from the incongruity of the tragic language and actions in the comic context; this need not imply that there was anything wrong with them in their original tragic context.

THE SKYTHIAN ARCHER

The Archer is the largest barbarian role in any of Aristophanes' plays. He is one of the force of Skythians who were established in Athens earlier in the fifth century as public slaves to assist magistrates

[46] H. Hansen *Philologus* 120 (1976) 184.

[47] Murray *Aristophanes* 117.

in keeping order.[48] They were armed with bows and arrows, the traditional weapon of Skythians. In some ways they resembled modern police constables, but there was one very important difference: they could not take action on their own initiative, but only under the orders of a magistrate. They appear three times in Aristophanes. In *Akharnians* 54–8 the Herald, on behalf of the Prytaneis, orders archers to arrest Amphitheos who is impeding the business of the Assembly (and similar action is mentioned in *Horsemen* 665); in *Lysistrata* 433–62 the Proboulos orders archers to arrest Lysistrata and other women; and in *Women at the Thesmophoria* 930–4 the Prytanis orders the Archer to bind and guard the Relative, and to strike with a whip anyone who approaches him. These instances show adequately the kinds of function which the Skythian archers performed.

In *Akharnians* and *Lysistrata* the archers are non-speaking characters, but in *Women at the Thesmophoria* the Archer, though silent on his first appearance when given his orders by the Prytanis, becomes a speaking character when he reappears with the bound Relative. He speaks bad Greek, full of mistakes but still intelligible. Aristophanes is ridiculing the way Skythians talked, to make the Athenian audience laugh; he may be caricaturing it, but it has been plausibly argued that the character's speech is likely to be a realistic, though exaggerated, representation of the manner in which Skythians actually did try to speak Greek.[49] Many Athenians probably thought patronizingly that a man must be stupid if he could not speak Greek properly, and the Archer is presented as stupid in other ways too. He knows nothing about tragedy, and does not understand what Euripides and the Relative are doing when they perform passages of *Andromeda*. He is very easily taken in by Euripides' device of getting a pretty girl to distract his attention, and again by the women who send him off in the wrong direction at the end.

So the main comic effect in this part of the play is the simple one of the stupid character who gets things wrong; the spectators laugh because they feel superior. However, two recent critics have seen

[48] Andokides 3.5 dates the establishment of this force after the Thirty Years Peace (446/5 BC), but some scholars have suggested that it could have been as early as the 470s. Cf. U. Albini *Andocide: De Pace* (Florence 1964) 60–1, E. M. Hall *Philologus* 133 (1989) 44, V. J. Hunter *Policing Athens* (Princeton 1994) 145–9.

[49] Hall *Philologus* 133 (1989) 38–40.

more than this in the character of the Archer. Long argues that he combines cruelty with stupidity, and considers this depiction of a barbarian to be 'unforgiving'.[50] The chief evidence for this interpretation is 1002–6, where the Relative asks him to slacken his bonds, and he tightens them instead. This might be deliberate cruelty, or it might just be stupidity, if the Archer moves the nail or peg the wrong way by mistake; but it is much more likely that Aristophanes has inserted these lines because the Relative's squeals will amuse the audience, rather than to make any particular point about the character of the Archer.

Hall, agreeing that the Archer is cruel, sees further subtleties.[51] She suggests that he contributes to the paratragedy because he resembles the barbaric rulers who appear near the end of certain Euripidean plays, especially Thoas in *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, Theoklymenos in *Helen*, and probably Kepheus in *Andromeda*. It is certainly possible that those characters were at the back of Aristophanes' mind; he had obviously been thinking about *Helen* and *Andromeda* recently and must have had access to copies of the texts. But it is not the case that he expected the audience to make this connection. When he wants the audience to understand that someone is imitating a particular tragic character, he makes the identification explicit; thus in the previous scene, parodying *Helen*, the Relative calls himself Helen, Euripides Menelaos, and the woman guarding him Theonoe (862, 897, 910), and in this scene he tells us that he himself is becoming Andromeda and Euripides Perseus (1011–12). But he does not call the Archer Theoklymenos or Kepheus. More generally, Hall sees the ridicule of the Archer as an expression of the resentment of Athenian citizens at the humiliation of being arrested by slaves, and she links this with the repression imposed by the oligarchic regime in 411 BC. But here also she goes too far. There is no evidence that the force of Skythian archers in Athens was viewed as inimical to democracy and the rights of citizens. It had already been in existence for at least thirty years, and the democratic Assembly could have abolished it at any time in that period if it had wished to do so. It did not, because these Skythians were merely instruments of the Athenian magistrates; if a citizen felt humiliated by being arrested, it was the magistrate whom he blamed, not the

[50] T. Long *Barbarians in Greek Comedy* (Carbondale, Ill. 1986) 106–7.
[51] Hall *Philologus* 133 (1989) 40–54.

archers. When Amphitheos is arrested by archers, Dikaiopolis cries 'You're wronging the Assembly, Prytaneis!' (*Akharnians* 56). So also in *Women at the Thesmophoria* it is a Prytanis, a citizen selected by lot, executing the orders of the Council (943), who gives instructions for the Relative to be bound to a board.

Thus I doubt whether the last part of this play is intended as a serious criticism of barbarians in general or of the Skythian archers in particular. It is a scene of farce, in which the Relative and the Archer are both absurd. Indeed *Women at the Thesmophoria* as a whole contains hardly anything which has a serious intent. It does include three hymns to various gods, which may have been impressive musically as well as poetically (312–30, 953–1000, 1136–59); but the rest of the play is for laughs, making fun in turn of Agathon, women, Euripides, and the Skythian archers, with a comic old man as the connecting thread. This play has a stronger claim than any of the others to be regarded as pure entertainment.

Aristophanes and Athens

An Introduction to the Plays

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