

Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* And The Nature Of Tragedy

P.D. Epstein
pde7229@okstate.edu

Two generations before Aristotle wrote his celebrated treatise on what the nature of tragic mimesis (or imitation) is, the comic poet Aristophanes had written two plays about the subject, *Thesmophoriazusae* and the more celebrated *Frogs*. The first play has the poet Euripides as its hero, and the second the god Dionysus. This god is the son of Zeus and a mortal woman, and at a festival in his honour, dramas both tragic and comic were presented at Athens. Through these festivals, the citizens of Athens saw the presentation of two different forms of the divine human relationship, each mediated by the characters' participation in the life of the *polis*. In tragedy, human life is seen as dependent on the life of the gods, while in Comedy, man makes the life of the gods his own. With one exception, *Persae* of Aeschylus, all the extant tragedies are set in the mythic realm, and all the comedies of Aristophanes involve an element drawn from contemporary Athenian life.

The tragedies of Euripides are closer to comedy than those of Aeschylus and Sophocles. In the plays of these latter two, the connection between the action on the stage and spectator is left to the spectator. Euripides, by presenting characters who are like contemporaries, draws closer to comedy. As well, the gods in his plays often directly address the audience and thus make the audience part of the action. These tendencies are completed in Aristophanes. His characters are all drawn from contemporary life, and they, together with the chorus, often address the audience directly.

In *Thesmophoriazusae*, Aristophanes, by examining the relation of Euripides and his plays to the contemporary world of Athens, is examining nothing else than the elements of Comedy itself. In this play Aristophanes shows the education both of the female sex and the tragic poet Euripides who has angered them. The women can no longer practice their favorite vices, because the dramatist has depicted them on the stage not as heroines but as scoundrels: this has alerted their husbands, who have begun to oppress them. The women thus turn their festival, the Thesmophoria¹, into a women's caucus. Instead of

¹ The Thesmophoria was a women's festival held in the Fall which solemnly marked the descent of Persephone into Hades, Demeter's mourning for her, and finally the return of Persephone. While in one sense it is a fertility festival, it assumes the conditions of a society that has a settled agricultural life. As B. B. Rogers notes in *The Thesmophoriazusae of Aristophanes* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1920), pp. x, xi, the festival celebrates Demeter and Persephone as the givers of Home. Certainly the whole structure of the

celebrating the Thesmophoroi, Persephone and Demeter, who have given marriage and family life to humanity, they plot to kill Euripides, so that they might be restored to their illicit pleasures. Instead of celebrating marriage, the women wish to enjoy various pleasures that undermine marriage. The result of the dispute is the total correction of both parties to it. As the women are led to return to the true celebration of the Thesmophoria, Euripides turns to the depiction of women as heroines whom men will heroically defend and marry. The play ends with Euripides agreeing in future to depict women heroically, acknowledging the difference between the heroic union of man and woman and a purely sensual connection. Thus the gifts of the Thesmophoroi are made known to humanity both through the religious rituals of the Thesmophoria and the dramatic action of the tragic festival. To everyday consciousness, the festival of the Thesmophoria and the festival of Dionysus, of which Tragedy is a part, are two discrete events. Because Comedy can present any aspect of contemporary life it finds significant, it is able to consider both in one dramatic action.

The great importance of the *Thesmophoriazusae* of Aristophanes in the development of his poetical theology lies in its presentation of the Thesmophoroi as that reality which humanity must imitate to be free. In every play of Aristophanes, a typical Athenian makes the life of an institution or god of the City his own, thereby giving it actuality. The particular form in which human individuality is formed by [its] making actual the essential realm differentiates one drama of the poet from another. The first five plays² assume the sovereignty of the Olympian religion and the institutions to which it gives life; in them, the hero experiences institutions or aspects of city life that fall short of describing its entire life³. In the sixth play, *Birds*, a representative Athenian makes actual the whole of the City's life, including its religion, and thereby not only equals but surpasses Zeus, the chief god of the City. With Zeus "overthrown" the poet describes the relation of the hero to the totality of the life of the City in a variety of forms. In *Thesmophoriazusae*, *Lysistrata*, and *Frogs*, he looks to other deities, respectively the Thesmophoroi, Athena and Dionysus, as that from which humanity derives its individuality. In *Ecclesiazusae*, he finds it in the objective institutions of Family and State, while in the last play *Plutus*, he devises a god who has no other reality than to bring men to acquire the range of human goods, from wealth to virtue.

Thesmophoriazusae was produced in 411 B.C, the same year as *Lysistrata*, several years after *Birds*. While *Lysistrata* assumes the displacement of Zeus accomplished in *Birds*, it looks to his daughter, Athena, as the centre of human life, and not a reality

play assumes that the goddesses are being celebrated as presiding deities of marriage. The women's feeling of oppression by their husbands and their conversion of the Thesmophoria into a means of establishing what they take to be female freedom can have no meaning except as a revolt against the established institution of marriage.

² *Acharnians*, *Clouds*, *Knights*, *Peace*, *Wasps*.

³ Dikaiopolis struggles to establish a pan-Hellenic peace in *Acharnians*. In *Clouds*, Strepsiades learns that his well-being depends not on self-serving sophistry but on the Olympian gods. *Knights* shows a vulgar sausage-seller able to restore the Demos, or people of Athens, to a healthy political order. In *Peace*, a farmer finds that peace among the Greeks is ultimately a gift of the gods, and in *Wasps*, a young man learns that he cannot keep his father (who represents the generation that fought at Marathon against the Persians) away from the political and festal life of the City.

EPSTEIN: ARISTOPHANES' *THESMOPHORIAZUSAE* AND THE
NATURE OF TRAGEDY

outside the Olympian gods. Thus after the women have restored order in both the familial and political realms they then praise Athena, the patron goddess of the City in its actual life. The poet's search for the essential elements of the City takes a more radical turn in *Thesmophoriazusae*, where the poet considers the divine human relation present in a religious festival. The festival draws together the gods as the causes of marriage, and the humans who celebrate that gift. Thus the comic poet has before him ready made as it were, the materials for a comedy, a certain unity of the divine life with the actual life of the spectators. In every comedy, the action begins with some aspect of life in Athens that is absolutely contemporary and which brings affliction of one kind or another to the hero. This latter can overcome the affliction only by finding his well being in relation to the life of the State, and in most plays, also to the gods who preside over that life.

Briefly put, the action of the play is as follows. Euripides has learned of the women's intent to plot his murder at their Thesmophoria; they are furious that his exposure of their vices in his dramas has led to their husbands' close supervision of them. The poet persuades his kinsman, Mnesilochus, to infiltrate the festival, dressed as a woman, in order to plead his cause. The women, alerted to the presence of an intruder, now devote their efforts to punishing him, rather than plotting the death of Euripides. Euripides tries to save his kinsman by "applying" various rescue scenes from his plays to the action. In these Euripides enacts the role of a hero who seeks to save an endangered woman, and neither Euripides nor Mnesilochus seems to have the slightest sense of the incongruities involved. The poet imagines that he can enact any part that he has written whenever he wants. Mnesilochus thinks that his temporary transvestitism entitles him to be a heroine in a drama. One remarkable thing has resulted from this attempt, however: we see that some of Euripides's plays treat women heroically and not as as vulgarians. The tragic heroes, however, cannot trick either the women or the Scythian policeman sent to guard Mnesilochus. These latter have one fact before them: Mnesilochus is a criminal who has invaded a women's only festival. There is no reason for them to think that they have been transported to the theatre of Dionysus, to become spectators at a play. The women, now celebrating the festival of their goddesses, agree to release Mnesilochus, if Euripides will depict women as heroines on the stage. He must still outwit the Scythian, and dressed as a procuress, he lures him with the promise of the enjoyment of a strumpet. The play ends as Euripides experiences the difference between what kind of mimesis belongs to the theatre and what to everyday life.

No critic has clearly seen the human-divine relation that animates the plot. However, taken together, the views of certain noted critics have within them the major elements of the drama. K. Dover does not seem to think that the play has a plot: "It is not difficult to say what the play is about: major parodies of Helen, Andromeda (both of which were first performed in the previous year) and at least one play of Agathon, plus minor parodies of some other Euripidean plays and parody of the proceedings of the assembly, are combined with slapstick, vulgar buffoonery, jokes about adultery and the ways of women, and a foreign policeman's pidgin Greek, to present something for all tastes, and

EPSTEIN: ARISTOPHANES' *THESMOPHORIAZUSAE* AND THE
NATURE OF TRAGEDY

the happy ending (happy for everyone except the policeman) leaves us with nothing difficult to think about."⁴

C. Whitman thinks that the drama does have a plot and emphasizes the importance of Euripides as the comic hero. Nevertheless he is in substantial agreement with Dover in thinking the play not only a parody of Euripides's plays but also a satire of the poet himself⁵. In fact, although many verses from the plays of Euripides are quoted verbatim, there is not one word of parody in them of Euripides's plays. It is his attempt to apply scenes from his plays to everyday life that is shown to be ridiculous, not the plays themselves. The mere repetition of an author's words does not constitute parody: they must in some obvious sense be held up to ridicule. *Mad Magazine* and the celebrated Alfred E. Newman seem to recognize this more clearly than Dover and Whitman.

Whitman thinks that the play is also a satire of Euripides himself. While the poet's initial confusion of tragedy and everyday life is indeed ridiculous, he eventually corrects his misconception, and a man capable of education is not simply an object of satire. For Whitman, however, this correction proves rather that Euripides is not a proper comic hero. A true hero, for him, is triumphant in the assertion of his private subjectivity both in thought and action. This dogmatic assertion, however, does not accord with the nature of the correction. If the correction of Euripides indeed makes his presentation of men and women more a presence of the gods, this does not limit his heroism.

K. Reckford has a real insight into the importance of the gods in the play. Although he does not treat their relation to the particulars of the plot extensively, he does know that the gods and the festal independence that they give underlie the whole drama⁶. In sum, then, the main elements of the play, the mocking of Euripides, the centrality of the hero and gods, have all appeared, although dividedly, amongst the views of the critics. This article will attempt to draw them together.

The action begins with a mysterious Euripides leading his kinsman Mnesilochus on a seeming wild goose chase. The latter tries to learn where they are going, but the poet answers cryptically that he must neither hear what he will soon see or see what he will soon hear. Euripides speaks here as a tragic poet, who reserves to himself the knowledge of the drama that is about to be played before his kinsman. A drama has both an audible and a visible element, and they originate in the mind of the poet. But Euripides's cryptic remark indicates that he has no sense of the incongruity of transferring directly what belongs to the theatre to the real world. Eventually they come to the house of his fellow tragic poet, Agathon. Euripides explains that he has learned that the women, keeping their festival of Thesmophoria, plan to use this as an occasion to plot his murder. He has depicted women in his dramas as drunkards, household thieves, and adulterers, and as a

⁴ K. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 168-9.

⁵ C. Whitman, *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp.216-27.

⁶ K. Reckford, *Aristophanes' Old-and-New Comedy* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), pp. 310,311.

EPSTEIN: ARISTOPHANES' *THESMOPHORIAZUSAE* AND THE
NATURE OF TRAGEDY

consequence their husbands have begun to keep a close watch on them. The women, for their part, hope that by ridding themselves of the poet, they can enjoy their vices with impunity. Euripides hopes that Agathon will address the women who are keeping the Thesmophoria on his behalf and save him from their wrath.

Euripides sees in the Thesmophoria and the women in the Euripidean tragedies presented at the festival of Dionysus the source of their current troubles. The women imagine that they can be free of the oppressive oversight of their husbands if they can change the image of themselves presented on the stage. Euripides for his part must somehow change the course of the Thesmophoria that will soon become a radical women's caucus if he is to escape death. To judge from their plans, neither Euripides nor the women seem to feel any inhibition about meddling in a festival that has heretofore not been within their particular province.

It seems natural that Euripides should have chosen Agathon as the person appropriate to infiltrate the Thesmophoria on his behalf. He has certain similarities to women already. As a pathic, he is accustomed to the embraces of men. And as a poet, he follows a peculiar practice he dresses like a woman before writing writing verses for the female sex. Nevertheless Agathon refuses to masquerade as a woman at the Thesmophoria. His fear of the women takes precedence for him over any sympathy that his androgyny and professional brotherhood might incline him to. Mnesilochus, a kinsman by marriage, volunteers to help Euripides at this point, and he submits to the arts of Euripides. So, depilitated and attired as a woman, he is prepared to attend the Thesmophoria. The poet swears to help him if he should fall into any difficulty.

Euripides here relies both on a debased form of the mimetic art of Tragedy and a family tie arising from marriage. He hopes to use both these to control the festival that celebrates the divine origin of marriage. To transform the appearance of a man so that he looks like a woman has no place in the mimesis appropriate to Tragedy. Male actors certainly wore costumes that indicated women, but the real mimesis was of a woman's actions and speech. Nevertheless, Euripides has every confidence that he can transfer his art out of the theatre to everyday life, with apparently no consciousness of the incongruities involved.

In a parallel incongruity, the women for their part also wish to extend the range of their festival, even to the elimination of a poet whose plays inspire their husbands to rein in their vices. With both the poet and women committed to their own outsized ambitions and follies, the comic poet begins his depiction of the clash between the decadent and the decadent.

Mnesilochus arrives at the festival. The women are indignant at Euripides for exposing their vices, and they especially regret that, after seeing his plays, their husbands have become more vigilant in preventing their pursuit of their vices; no one denies that Euripides has correctly exposed their vices. One speaker suggests that only Euripides' death will restore them to their former unfettered enjoyment.

EPSTEIN: ARISTOPHANES' *THESMOPHORIAZUSAE* AND THE
NATURE OF TRAGEDY

Mnesilochus then tries to persuade the women that Euripides has been only somewhat their enemy. He has not, says Mnesilochus, exposed all their vices; he lists a number of infamous practices that Euripides has not shown on the stage. This does not appease the women, and in their anger, and in the failure of Mnesilochus, one sees the limits of that persuasion for which Euripides was so famous, or perhaps notorious. When Euripides is writing a tragic drama, it is his own *logos* that animates all the characters, their speeches and the effects of their speeches. Here outside the self-contained world of the drama, Mnesilochus must devise his own speeches and must confront people whose thoughts and desires arise entirely from their own minds. What Mnesilochus does is for the benefit of Euripides but it does not fall within the thought of Euripides.

At this point, Cleisthenes, a well-known pathic and, by his own account, a devoted friend of women, arrives to announce that Euripides has sent a man into their meeting. A brief physical investigation shows that Mnesilochus, despite his efforts to conceal it, has a penis and is thus the intruder. The women tie him up, awaiting the arrival of a magistrate to determine his punishment. As is evident, the mimetic arts cannot undo what nature has done. The real measure is whether he is a married woman or not: the women have used a vulgar measure to discover the illegality of Mnesilochus's presence.

With this, the first division of the action ends. Neither Euripides nor the women have gained that which they consciously aimed at. The latter had hoped to convert their festival into a means of freeing themselves from the restraint of Euripides. They are now preoccupied with the sexual bona fides of those present. Their original concern with the natural benefits of being wives has degenerated into an obsession with the physical side of their persons.

Euripides for his part had hoped to adapt the art of tragic mimesis to save himself from the schemes of the women. He has tried to use his tragedian's art to control the women's festival. This art has proven, first, weaker than the anger of the women and finally weaker than nature. No art has been able to obscure Mnesilochus' masculine nature; Euripides has not been able to triumph by persuading the women that he uses his art rightly. While the women are no longer debating about how best to kill him, they have in their power a kinsman he has pledged to save from any danger.

For both Euripides and the women, the change from their original intention will compel them to a new relation to the festivals. The women find themselves now enforcing an actual rule of their Thesmophoria by seeking to have Mnesilochus punished. They are no longer trying to dictate the content of tragedy by ridding themselves of a poet unfavorable to their interests.

Euripides will soon have to confront the two festivals, the tragic festival and the Thesmophoria, more in accord with their original content. He will no longer oppose women who are devoting themselves to the celebration of their festival, now not scheming to enjoy their vulgar ends. When soon he will try to use his tragic art for ends outside the drama, he will pursue an ethical end, the rescue of his kinsman.

EPSTEIN: ARISTOPHANES' *THESMOPHORIAZUSAE* AND THE
NATURE OF TRAGEDY

In the parabasis, the women appeal to the audience to give up their misogyny and thus show that they have moved beyond the petty criminality that had inspired Euripides's attacks in the first instance. First the women indicate how very contradictory men are in their attitude to women. Although they denigrate women as a plague, they constantly pursue them. Second, the women argue that a matron's status in the State should depend on the good or evil that her son does to the State. This latter development shows that the women have changed from their earlier desire to kill Euripides in order to secure their natural good, to declaring civic virtue the true measure of their lives. The parabasis marks, then, a true turning point; just as Euripides must acknowledge the female sex as more than a gang of anarchists, so the women acknowledge men as capable of virtue in the State.

In the remainder of the play, Euripides learns both to depict women heroically in his dramas and to properly distinguish this realm of the dramatic festival from the realm of the everyday. His education here results from his inability to free his kinsman by 'applying' two rescue scenes from his plays to his predicament. The poet appears in both as a hero who will save a heroine enacted by Mnesilochus. But he is unable to intrude his plays into the realm of the Thesmophoria. The women, intent now on celebrating their festival, simply regard Mnesilochus as a criminal whom the State will punish. Euripides thus is compelled to agree to treat all women heroically in his dramas in exchange for the release of his kinsman. The women, however, leave it to the poet to free his kinsman from his Scythian guard.

After the parabasis, Euripides tries to save Mnesilochus by using various scenes from his plays. First, he undertakes the role of Menelaos with his kinsman playing Helen, in Egypt. Second, he plays Perseus, and Mnesilochus Andromeda. These scenes show Euripides's developing understanding of the relation between Tragedy and life in the every day world. In them Euripides has changed considerably from his representation at the beginning of the play. Then he made every day women the model for his dramas. Now he makes heroic women and the men moved by them the models for his own action to save his kinsman. However, he has not yet clearly distinguished between the realms of drama and everyday life. This leads him to act as if the women celebrating the Thesmophoria are the enemies of his heroines; to the contrary, they have given up their earlier activity as a women's caucus, to celebrate Demeter and Persephone. In doing so they declare the divine ground of Euripides's attempt at freeing his kinsman.

The parallel development of Euripides and the women has the following form. First Euripides attempts as Menelaos to save his wife Helen, and this is interrupted by the arrival of the Scythian policeman who ties Mnesilochus to a plank. Then Euripides, impersonating the unmarried Perseus, is moved by the suffering of Andromeda/Mnesilochus, thereby showing the general capacity of female virtue to draw male heroism to it.

Therefore, when Euripides's Perseus cannot save Mnesilochus's Andromeda, the poet must acknowledge the failure of this means of saving his kinsman from the women. He must treat with them as man to women, as poet to Thesmophoriazusae. He will treat

EPSTEIN: ARISTOPHANES' *THESMOPHORIAZUSAE* AND THE
NATURE OF TRAGEDY

all women heroically in his plays, and they will not prosecute his kinsman. The women agree to this, but the eluding of the Scythian policeman they leave to Euripides. To do this, Euripides dresses as a procuress, in order to lure the Scythian away with the promised enjoyment of a strumpet. With this distinction between the mimesis proper to tragedy and that proper to a ruse, the play ends.

In this agreement, Euripides gives reality to the Thesmophoroi. They have given the marital tie to mortals, but it rests with the latter to make this gift actual. Through their festival the women have celebrated the goddesses and thus made known their gift. In Tragedy, by depicting women heroically, Euripides will show women who through their lives give life to this gift. Moreover, because he has attained theoretical clarity about the nature of women and the family, he can now succeed in the realm of practical activity and free his kinsman. When Euripides dresses up as a procuress, he is not here using a scene from one of his own plays. He does not, moreover, propose to overcome the Scythian with drama, but with what appeals to his barbarian nature, a strumpet. The Scythian gladly deserts his appointed post to pursue her, and the women help Euripides by misleading the guard about where the strumpet has gone.

Thus the drama ends with both Euripides and the women proclaiming the Thesmophoroi. The women do so more directly by singing hymns of praise. The poet does so through the dramas he has enacted and those that he promised to enact. He has celebrated marriage by showing the heroism that a woman can inspire in a man. His ruse with the Scythian shows that he knows the difference between a conjugal relation and a purely sensual one. He has moreover promised to depict women heroically in future. Thus although the poet and the women proclaim a divine gift in their festivals, their human activity is essential to that proclamation. Their deviation from their respective festivals and their return to them indicates that in human hands and not divine lies the manifestation of the divine gift. Thus even in festivals that declare a divine human relation, human activity supplies the truly subjective element.

Oklahoma State University