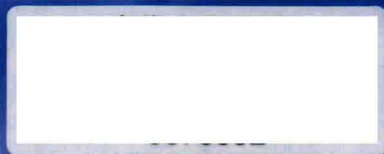


ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Aristophanes and Women

Lauren K. Taaffe

書館



Aristophanes and Women

Lauren K. Taaffe



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

First published 1993
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

© 1993 Lauren K. Taaffe

Typeset in Baskerville by Megaron, Cardiff, Wales
Printed and bound in Great Britain by T. J. Press (Padstow) Ltd,
Padstow, Cornwall
Printed on acid free paper

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Taaffe, Lauren K.

Aristophanes and Women / Lauren K. Taaffe.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Aristophanes—Characters—Women. 2. Greek drama, (Comedy)—History and criticism. 3. Women and literature—Greece.

I. Title.

PA3879.T33 1994
882'01—dc20 93—18362

ISBN 0-415-09514-X

Aristophanes and Women

Aristophanes and Women, first published in 1993, investigates the workings of the great Athenian comedian's 'women plays' in an attempt to discern why they were in fact probably quite funny to their original audiences. It is argued that modern students, scholars, and dramatists need to consider much more closely the conditions of the plays' ancient productions when evaluating their ostensible themes.

Three plays are focused upon: *Lysistrata*, *Thesmophoriazusae*, and *Ecclesiazusae*. All seem to speak quite eloquently to contemporary concerns about women's rights, the value of women's work, and the relationships between women and war, literary representation and politics.

On the one hand, Professor Taaffe tries to retrieve what an ancient Athenian audience may have appreciated about these plays and what their central theses may have meant within that culture. On the other hand, Aristophanes is discussed from the perspective of a late twentieth-century, specifically female, reader.

ARISTOPHANES AND WOMEN

Lauren K. Taaffe



London and New York

To my father and the memory
of my mother

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	1
1 THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE FIGURES IN ARISTOPHANES' PLAYS BEFORE 411 BCE	23
2 WOMEN AS WOMEN, MEN AS MEN: <i>LYSISTRATA</i>	48
3 MEN AS WOMEN: <i>THESMOPHORIAZUSAE</i>	74
4 WOMEN AS MEN: <i>ECCLESIAZUSAE</i>	103
5 THE LEGACY OF ARISTOPHANES' WOMEN	134
<i>Notes</i>	147
<i>Bibliography</i>	195
<i>Index</i>	209
<i>Index of passages discussed</i>	213

FIGURES

1 Dancers dressed as men and women	6
2 Bearded dancers dressed as men and women	7
3 Dancers with additional female heads (masks?)	8
4 Comic actors dressed as women	8

INTRODUCTION

A clever citizen founds a city in the sky, rules over the birds, and replaces Zeus; a poor farmer negotiates a private peace with his city's arch-enemy; war-weary brides refuse sex with their husbands and an army of old women seize the city's treasury to force a peace treaty; a man disguised as a woman sneaks into a secret women's festival to save his relative from death; a group of women dressed as men overthrow the government through a peaceful *coup d'état*. Aristophanes' plots present readers and spectators with wonderful worlds that long for peace, plenty, and happiness for the underdog. Yet, the interpreter of ancient Greek comedy faces a problematic and frustrating task. Not only do we possess a relatively small number of representative texts – tragedy remains in better condition than comedy, with whole extant works by three central authors compared to comedy's one author – but these texts also often appear fragmentary or spurious in part. The manuscripts contain no stage directions, actors' notes, or author's revisions. We have no information about the original productions, no reviews, no detailed history of any play's reception. Our information about almost every imaginable aspect of ancient Greek theater production is extremely limited. Hence, the enterprise of this book will require a stretch of imagination. We can, however, approach the circumstances surrounding the original production of Aristophanes' plays with educated guesses and imaginative suggestions based on the little retrievable evidence. This chapter will review the available information about the conditions of theatrical performance and production in ancient Athens as well as describe the current state of research on the images of women in ancient Greek literature. At its end, I will describe the theories of feminist performance critics and develop a methodology for looking at the construction of the female figures in Aristophanes' plays.

COMIC THEATER IN ANCIENT GREECE

Theater at Athens occurred under the auspices of the government at two official festivals, the City Dionysia (sometimes referred to as the Great Dionysia) and the Lenaea. Both festivals were organized forms of worshipping Dionysus, the god of wine. From the earliest times, Dionysus is associated with all the features of theater: singing, dancing, changes of identity, and role-playing revelry. At the height of Athens' power, tragedies, satyr plays, and comedies were all performed at these festivals, and the playwrights, actors, choruses, and producers all competed for prizes. The Lenaea appears to have placed emphasis on comic competition, the City Dionysia on tragic. The first recorded victor in the tragic competition is Thespis, whose victory was in 534 BCE, although it is not clear whether he won at the City Dionysia or at another dramatic festival. Comedy was initiated at the City Dionysia some fifty years later, in 486 BCE. The Lenaea began comic performances in 442 BCE and added tragedy in 432 BCE.¹

The City Dionysia was held in March or April. A religious celebration of spring and renewal, the City Dionysia was attended by people from all over Greece and the rest of the ancient Greek-speaking Mediterranean as well as Athenians, since the weather was gentler and the seas more navigable. The Lenaea, held in January or February, was by contrast a more local festival attended only by Athenians. Where in Athens the Lenaea was held is not known for certain; the City Dionysia was held in the Theater of Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis, which could seat as many as 17,000 spectators.² These festivals lasted for several days. Before the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) tapped Athens' time, attention, and financial resources, the City Dionysia held dramatic competitions for five consecutive days. During the war, the competitions were cut back to three days.

Each day of the festival saw dramatic performances of three types: tragedy, satyr play, and comedy. In the morning, four plays by a single tragic playwright – three tragedies and a satyr play – would be performed. The tragedies may have formed a trilogy, as Aeschylus' *Oresteia* did, or three plays may have embraced a single theme in different ways, or the plays may have been ostensibly unrelated. A satyr play, which would farcically dramatize traditional myths, followed. The chorus featured mischievous satyrs, mythological half-goat, half-human, male creatures associated with Dionysus. The satyr play seems to have made an effective bridge between tragedy and comedy.³ Its gentle and silly humor may have eased the audience from tragedy into comedy. In the afternoon, a single comedy would be

INTRODUCTION

performed. On the last day of the festival, judges would vote and rank the tragic and comic plays for prizes.

The purpose of the Lenaea and the City Dionysia remains multifold. The offering to Dionysus not only of dramatic works but also of the preliminary procession, sacrifices, and other ritual performances surely honors the mysteries of the god. The occasion also provided an opportunity for public celebration of Athenian power and wealth; foreign visitors to the City Dionysia would be especial observers of the display of Athenian public spirit. The public and civic nature of the festival also ensures its effectiveness as a vehicle of ideas for collective identity and action.

In order to have a play performed at one of these festivals, a playwright would present his plans for the play to the appointed archon in hopes of being 'granted a chorus' (χορὸν διδόναι). After receiving approval, the playwright would be granted actors and a stipend for production expenses. Playwrights thus often produced their own plays. The transfer of this responsibility to another expert was not unheard of. For example, Aristophanes turned the matters of production for *Lysistrata* over to Kallistratos. Still, in addition to bearing responsibility for composition of the dramatic text, the playwright held the responsibility of teaching his actors their parts in the play; he is often referred to as the 'teacher' (διδάσκαλος). He would also be assigned a sponsor, called a *choregos* (χορηγός). The *choregos* was characteristically a wealthy Athenian citizen who, perhaps, sought to increase his reputation and influence by defraying the costs of a winning play and financially sponsoring its author. Typically, a victorious *choregos* would erect a monument of some sort commemorating his, and the poet's, success; the tripod presented as a prize would adorn the monument (Pickard-Cambridge 1962: 86-91). This *choregos* was responsible for financing the production; he was charged with obtaining and paying for the members of the chorus, whom he would probably select from the members of his own tribe. He also hired the chorus-trainer (χοροδιδάσκαλος) and the musicians, arranged for the chorus' costumes, and covered any other expenses incurred by the chorus. The prizes and payment to actors and playwrights came from the public treasury and were subject to a vote of the assembly. For those unfamiliar with ancient Greek theater, the important point here is that the circumstances surrounding the original performances of these plays indicate a great deal of state control and supervision as well as religious significance. In addition, the patronage of the *choregos* may or may not have influenced the final

content of the drama. While Aristophanes' political satire indicates that the poet retained quite a bit of freedom of expression, theater and theatrical performances formed and constituted a large part of Athens' ideological identity (Goldhill 1990; Henderson 1990; Longo 1990). In fact, the audience would have attended through religious and civic duty as much as through a desire for entertainment.

As is well known, all the parts in Greek drama were played by male actors. In performance, ancient Greek comic actors wore highly stylized costumes, the bottom layer of which consisted of bodysuits that had heavily padded arms and legs, often with extra wrinkles at the wrists and ankles. Bellies and rear ends were enlarged by more pads. Exaggerated and perhaps grotesque masks (depending on the nature of the character) covered their faces. While Old Comedy relies on physicality for much of its humor, it does not rely on malleable facial expressions. Over this comically constructed body, an actor wore the street dress appropriate for his character's type. Finally, male characters also wore large leather phalloi attached to their bodysuits. These phalloi were adjustable; they could be rolled up and hidden from view, extended straight out and visible, or manipulated for comic effect to any possible position in between.⁴ Female characters were played with pads underneath their clothes as well. Since female characters do not become conspicuous in what remains of Old Comedy until *Lysistrata*, I will say more about the comic costume in discussion of that play.

Ritual role-playing and role-exchange have long been associated with festivals in many cultures, and so transvestite dramatic performances are historically a traditional phenomenon (Ackroyd 1979; Baker 1976; Davis 1978).⁵ Boy actors played all the female parts in Shakespeare's plays, for example; female actors first appeared on the English stage in 1660. Interpreters of ancient Greek drama, however, seldom mention this central phenomenon of Greek theater. The convention of male actors is usually dismissed as a practice accepted without further thought by audiences, actors, and playwrights alike.⁶ Because of the dearth of information surrounding the ancient performances of Aristophanes' (and others') plays, we are unable to determine how ancient audiences would have perceived the appearance of female characters on the comic stage. Would they have been conscious of the male actor impersonating a woman, as modern audiences are when they watch female impersonators sing in the guise of Judy Garland or when they watch old videotapes of Flip Wilson's Geraldine?⁷ That prizes were awarded to the best actors certainly

INTRODUCTION

suggests that the audience, or at least the judges, remained aware and constantly evaluative of the individual actor underneath the costume. Given human differences, there was most likely a multiplicity of audience responses. The plays themselves beg the question: just as in modern transvestite comedies like *Some Like it Hot*, transvestism, acting, and disguise by costume all form a self-conscious part of the plots of *Lysistrata*, *Thesmophoriazusae*, and *Ecclesiazusae*. To provide a background, some information about the visual phenomenon of the actor on the ancient comic stage is in order.

Unfortunately, relatively little evidence also remains to us of the actual stage appearance of ancient comic characters. Vase illustrations of dramatic performances offer the only visual information about ancient performance practice. In addition, all the vases featured in the few published illustrations of male actors in pre-dramatic performances or in comedy playing women, with one exception (Fig. 1), were commissioned for someone involved in the performance's production.⁸ Although these vases and their paintings were made to order in some fashion, that women are so rarely represented as true to life, as they often are in illustrations of tragedy, strengthens the possibility that men in comedy were not to be thought of as really becoming women. Vase-painters remained aware of dramatic convention in comedy and, perhaps, so did audiences.⁹ The first two vase-paintings I discuss illustrate actors' performances in rituals which are dated to the time before the Athenian tragic and comic festivals began. Although the evidence here is from the pre-dramatic chorus, it nonetheless looks forward to the phenomenon of male actors portraying women in fifth-century Attic comedy.

Figure 1, an Attic red-figure column-krater dated to 600–550 BCE, shows a padded male pre-dramatic chorus with some members dressed as men and others as women (Trendall and Webster 1971: I. 1, 7). It is the only surviving example of what was probably a stock *symposion* vase (ibid. 6).¹⁰ White skin distinguishes the females from the males, a traditional formula for indicating sexual difference. Color-coded gender is not unknown in earlier art of the region. For instance, Minoan frescoes found at Knossos and other sites in Crete portray women with white skin and men with dark skin.¹¹ The women in Figure 1 wear the same costumes as the men and they dance in the same fashion. Trendall likens the male figures to later representations of satyrs and the female figures to later representations of nymphs (ibid. 20).



Figure 1 Dancers dressed as men and women
(Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; 1966.17).

Figure 2, an Attic black-figure kylix by the Heidelberg Painter and dated to 560–540 BCE (Trendall and Webster 1971: I. 1, 8), shows another chorus of dancers, some dressed as women.¹² Their padded bodies indicate that they are actors. Their beards underscore the artifice of representation: even though three actors wear long women's *chitones*, they retain their facial hair, a sign of adult masculinity. In addition, all the figures have dark skin. The painter reveals an awareness of costume and artifice in his representation of actors playing their roles here. As Trendall provocatively writes, 'Perhaps our artist thought of a chorus of men dressed up as maenads' (ibid. 20).¹³ If so, he also means for us to think of men dressed as maenads, rather than the maenads themselves. Illustrations of other pre-dramatic choruses follow a similar pattern of representing an illusion of gender disguise. The Berlin Painter, in his well-known picture of a chorus mounted on horses (Attic black-figure amphora, 550–540 BCE), lets the chorus's faces peek out from underneath their horse-head masks (Trendall and Webster 1971: I. 1, 9), for example.

Some fifth-century illustrations of tragedy indicate the same awareness of the actor's sex. An Attic red-figure skyphos by the Penelope painter, dated 440 BCE, presents a scene from the *Oresteia*

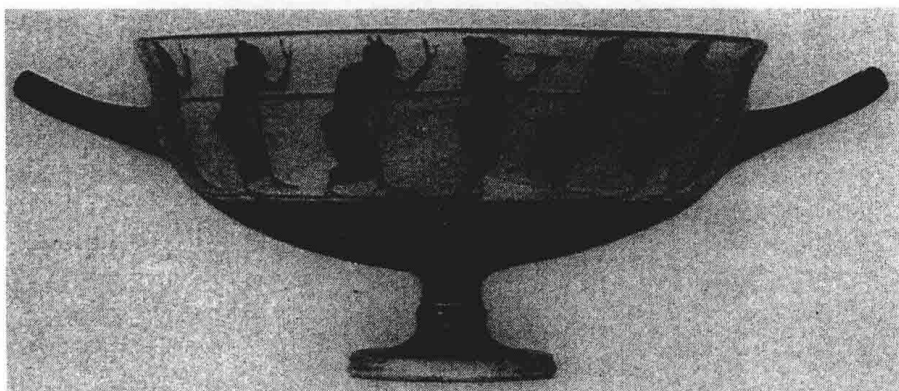


Figure 2 Bearded dancers dressed as men and women
(Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam; 3356).

(Trendall and Webster 1971: III. 1, 2). Two women stand with offerings at a tomb marked *AGAMEM[NON]* (ΑΓΑΜΕΜ [NON]). The word *KALO[S]* (ΚΑΛΟ[Σ]) is written near the woman on the right. Trendall writes: ‘*kalos*, “beautiful”, without a name attached refers to one of the figures in the scene; as it is masculine, the painter shows that he thinks of a chorus-man performing a female part’ (Trendall and Webster 1971: 41). Another Attic amphora, this one illustrating a scene from *Phineus* (Nikon Painter, 470–450 BCE), has the same *KALOS* written near the Harpies, who are running off with Phineus’ food (Trendall and Webster 1971: III. 1, 25).

Other vases reveal the actor’s sex as he prepares to play a female role in tragedy. Fragments of an oenochoe (470–460 BCE) found in the Athenian Agora indicate actors in various states of dress (Pickard-Cambridge 1968: fig. 32). One nude male, probably an actor’s attendant, holds a female mask in his right hand. The foot and ankle of another figure show traces of a long *chiton*. The actors appear to be dressed to play the roles of women. A more intact bell-krater (c. 460–450 BCE) shows two men preparing for a choral performance of some kind (ibid. fig. 33). One wears a maenad’s costume and a visible female mask. The other man remains unmasked and holds a male mask in his hand; he may be getting ready to play Dionysus. Finally, a pelike (c. 430 BCE) shows two men dressing for a choral performance as women (ibid. fig. 34). They wear knee-length *chitones* and soft boots. The man on the left, with his mask in place, holds a *himation*.¹⁴ On the right, his companion pulls on a boot; a female mask lies on the ground at his feet.

Vase-paintings of male actors as female characters in comedy similarly show actors not in full costume, but rather in the process of



Figure 3 Dancers with additional female heads (masks?) (Museo Artistico Industriale, Rome).



Figure 4 Comic actors dressed as women (Archäologisches Institut der Universität Heidelberg; B 134).

INTRODUCTION

putting on the costumes of female characters or with their own sex revealed in some other way. Figure 3, an Attic black-figure mastos cup dated to 520 BCE (ibid. pl. V b, no. 18), shows a chorus of eight padded male dancers, three with female masks placed on top of their heads. That the men with the extra 'heads' are nude makes this representation of male actors playing women rather unusual. The painter again portrays the reality that male actors played female roles. He, at least, never lost sight of the sexual identity underneath the costume. Like an X-ray, the illustration displays both the surface illusion and also the truth inside. The costume has all but disappeared; the female mask, almost a second thought, is all that is necessary to indicate the conventions of performance.¹⁵

For my study here, the most pertinent example of this deliberate exposure of the illusion of an actor's gender disguise appears in Figure 4, an illustration that commentators often think of as inspired by *Ecclesiazusae*. This Attic red-figure bell-krater, roughly dated to 390–380 BCE, is contemporary with *Ecclesiazusae* (Trendall and Webster 1971: IV, 4). In the painting, two chorus-men dressed as women and wearing long patterned *chitones* are dancing. The actor on the left is fully costumed as a woman. He has put his mask in place and wrapped a long *himation* around his *chiton*, draping it over the back of his head in the feminine style. The other actor dances without a *himation*, his chest and bare legs exposed, and his mask raised up to reveal his face. Of this illustration, Trendall writes:

The need to maintain dramatic illusion is over and so the chorus-man can show his face. The moment might be either when the chorus dance off the stage at the end of the play . . . or when they danced in the procession which escorted the statue of Dionysus out of the theatre.

(Trendall and Webster 1971: 119)

That the painter has chosen to portray this moment, rather than one in which both actors are in full costume, is important. While he does commemorate the actors' performances, he also commemorates a moment when their illusion of gender disguise is displayed. Just so, manipulation of costume and language constantly reveals the illusion of gender disguise in Aristophanes' plays.

Complete illusion does not often exist in the visual representation of dramatic choruses dressed as women. The iconographic tradition appears to call for a deliberate reminder of the artificial nature of dramatic performance. No male actor in female dress is pictured