

Andreja Inkret

## ECCLESIAZUSAE AND THE PROBLEM OF MALE ACTORS PLAYING WOMEN DISGUISED AS MEN\*

**Abstract:**

In Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*, women decide to put an end to the inefficient political decisions of men: in order to make their way to the *ecclesia* and thus complete their plan, they have to dress up and behave like men. In my essay, *Aristophanes' Ecclesiazusae and the problem of male actors playing women disguised as men*, I focus on the specifics and characteristics of female characters pretending to be men. In the Greek theatre, the effect of the theme was in my opinion emphasised as characters of male and female gender were by stage convention represented by male actors only.

**Key words:** Greek actors, Greek dramatic characters, Greek scenic conventions, Greek theatre, Greek drama

**Introduction: Reading Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae***

At the very beginning, it would be useful to define the groundwork of the following essay: the comedy of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*.

The text of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* is in its very basic form a dramatic text. As such it has, as far as literary theory is concerned, a double status; on the one hand, it exists as a mere literary text, characterised mostly by its self-sufficiency. On the other hand, this "literary text" serves only as a basis for a potential performance and is thus in its essence insufficient; one could say it is only a libretto for performance, a basis for various productions which differ from one another, since even the repetition of the same production can never be the same as the one that has happened before.<sup>1</sup> As such it cannot be regarded just as a literary text but as a part of a performing process as well. *Ecclesiazusae* could thus be read as the object of both literary theory and theatrical theory. One must bear in mind that, in terms of semiotics, the performance of *Ecclesiazusae* as an act of communication exists within the limits of two contexts, a dramatic context and a theatrical one, which "brings about a *multiplication* of communicational factors".<sup>2</sup>

\*The article was written in autumn 2000 during a study period at University of Cambridge, Faculty of Classics.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Fischer-Lichte (1984), pp. 138, Procházka (1984), pp. 102, Bennett (1990), pp. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Elam (1980), pp. 37.

As a dramatic text in its literary form,<sup>3</sup> *Ecclesiazusae* does not contain any stage directions.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless the editions, commentaries, and translations<sup>5</sup> show that *Ecclesiazusae* exists as a kind of a “literary” libretto as well since the stage directions concerning *Ecclesiazusae* – although they all deal with the same text – differ from one modern edition to another.

Finally, *Ecclesiazusae* was written for performance in the Greek theatre. The Greek theatre, like other theatres of different eras, was marked by its own special conventions. Some of these have survived and are still part of the modern tradition, while others have become obsolete and seem to be only a matter of theatrical history.<sup>6</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that perhaps the most vivid dramatic weapon of Aristophanes lies in his playing with, questioning and deriding contemporary scenic conventions. One must remember that theatricality, which is based on theatrical conventions in the first place, has played an essential part in all the stages of producing *Ecclesiazusae*: for the author, the producer, and the spectator. Thus one has no reason not to assume that the awareness of conventions, and particularly of those which no longer persist in our theatre, is important for a modern editor, translator, producer, spectator and reader.

<sup>3</sup> According to Ussher (cf. Aristophanes, 1986, pp. xxxix-xlvi), there are seven manuscripts containing the text in whole or in part. The oldest and most important, *R(avennas)*, dates back to the tenth century.

<sup>4</sup> In this context, the following fact has to be emphasised: a Greek playwright had an essential directorial function while the play was being produced, which explains why there are so few stage directions in ancient texts (cf. Taplin, 1977). Nowadays, by contrast, widespread publications of dramas imply a different status of dramatic texts and the essential part of a director leads to a considerably less important role of the author.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix, containing a selection of stage directions for the opening scene of the play, made by commentators, editors, and translators.

<sup>6</sup> McLeish (1980, pp. 79-80) even traces the difference between the ancient and the modern theatre, referring to the former as “the theatre of convention” and to the latter as “the theatre of illusion”. The former profits from theatricality, its borders and limits, while the latter relies on the “illusion of reality”: “in the theatre of illusion the effects *simulate* reality; in the theatre of convention the effects *symbolise* reality.” Rather than rely on this broad definition, one might find Carlson’s (1990, pp. XIV-XV) remark on the semiotic development of theatre more useful in this context: while speaking about “iconicity” – i.e. “when an element in the production is not merely ‘like’ the thing it represents, but is in fact the same thing or at least the same *kind* of thing” – and audiences which “utilize extra-theatrical codes to understand and interpret” the happening in the theatre, he argues that “iconicity” at the same time “makes the theatre peculiarly susceptible to audience responses based on assumptions developed outside the art. Rather than attempt to limit this indeterminacy by emphasizing its own internal codes and systems by meaning, the theatre, especially in the West, has historically sought new power and stimulus by continually absorbing the raw material of everyday life”.

## *ECCLESIAZUSAE* AND MALE ACTORS PLAYING WOMEN DISGUISED AS MEN

### I. Androcracy of actors, gynaecocracy of characters

*The problem of male actors playing women disguised as men* appears to be the problem of conventions. The importance of one of them, the convention of male actors playing roles of both genders, can be emphasised by outlining the mere plot line of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*. Briefly, *Ecclesiazusae* is a comedy about women who, with Praxagora as a leader, decide to put an end to the inefficient political decisions of men. They plan to put forward a proposal to hand the political control over to them, vote to accept it and thus establish their own government. In order to make their way to the *ecclesia* and thus complete their plan, they have to dress up and behave like men.<sup>7</sup>

No matter how the convention of male actors playing the roles of both genders was taken for granted by the Greek audience, one cannot neglect the difference which exists between the Greek production in 392 BC, when women were played by male actors, and one of the modern productions when actors are of both sexes. The fact can be strengthened by the arguments of semiotics, according to which everything on the stage is a sign with its own special meaning for the audience.<sup>8</sup>

In the following pages, I will take a closer look at the comedy, laying particular attention to a male actor. I propose that the effect produced by the convention of male actors playing roles of both genders is important for the modern understanding of *Ecclesiazusae*.

---

<sup>7</sup> The plot of *Ecclesiazusae* can be compared to *Lysistrata*. In both plays, women are not satisfied with male policy: in *Ecclesiazusae*, they are unsatisfied with male government in general, whereas in *Lysistrata*, they want to bring the long war to an end. In both plays, they intend to occupy the very centres of male political action: *acropolis* and *ecclesia*. But in *Lysistrata* women decide to blackmail their husbands: in their sexual strike, their female attributes become the most important weapon and should as such be exaggerated in every possible way. The *akropolis*, on the other hand, is occupied with another women's deception: women pretend to sacrifice to the goddesses, and thus complete their plan with the only public occupation that was allowed to them. One can conclude that they achieve what they want *as women* and with the help of women's own weapons, which are successful in the first place due to their female character. In *Ecclesiazusae*, on the contrary, the women decide to achieve their plan *as men*.

<sup>8</sup> Barthes (1972, pp. 261-262) refers to theatre as to "a kind of cybernetic machine", which is a permanent sender of various messages from the beginning of performance till its end.

## II. Male actor, female character: spectator and signs

Let us put ourselves in the place of a spectator in the theatre of Dionysos, in 392 BC, and thus try to trace at least the most probable “experience of the audience”.<sup>9</sup> When the first figure of *Ecclesiazusae* appears on the stage, our spectator knows that the body of this figure is a male body. He is aware that this body can represent a female character in this scene and, without any problem, a male character in the following one. We may assume that our spectator looks for the signs that will help him recognise the figure on the stage as a male or a female character. Such signs might be the costume, padding, movement, voice, and – what seems to be the most important element – the mask. A male actor representing a female character might thus wear a long colourful *chiton*, *himation*, which could be draped over the head, and light women’s sandals;<sup>10</sup> he might be padded as a female; he might move in a woman’s way;<sup>11</sup> he might even alter his voice;<sup>12</sup> his mask might be of white colour, smooth, and beardless.

But our spectator, watching *Ecclesiazusae*, has to complete a harder task, since he has to recognise a male actor playing a female character who wants to look and behave like a man. In both cases, whether the actor playing Praxagora is already in male disguise, or only completes his disguise later on the stage,<sup>13</sup> one may assume that the spectator’s ability to identify the character’s double gender must comprise the recognising the very basic signs. One might expect that these signs are of two sorts: one of them should be strongly related to the convention and should thus not, at least with regard to the mere plot, leave any doubt about the character’s true gender. The other, indicating the gender of the hero-in-disguise, might be

<sup>9</sup> Carlson (1990), pp. XV.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Stone (1981).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Chorus’ (483) instructions on how the women should move like men; references are taken from Sommerstein’s edition and translation of *Ecclesiazusae* (Aristophanes 1998), if not indicated otherwise.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. ὅπως ἀνδριστι καὶ καλῶς ἐρεῖς (“that you speak man’s language and speak well”, 149): according to Ussher (Aristophanes 1986, pp. 96) ἀνδριστι means “in a man’s voice”. In *Thesmophoriazusae*, Euripides, instructing Mnesilochos how he should behave like a woman, recommends him to alter his voice: ἦν λαλῆς δ’, ὅπως τῷ φθέγματι γυναικειῖς εὖ καὶ πιθανῶς (“Only, if you talk, make sure you put on a good, convincing woman’s voice”, 267-268).

<sup>13</sup> One cannot see from the text whether Praxagora and her companions are already in their disguises or not. One of the women is said to have come in her husband’s shoes (47), but they do not seem to wear men’s cloaks (cf. 275-276) and beards (cf. 273) from the very beginning. It is important that in *Acharnians* (739-747), *Frogs* (494-502, 527-541, 589-604), *Thesmophoriazusae* (213-267) dressing up is represented on stage.

more to do with funny exaggeration if not with prejudices about the characteristics of the opposite sex.<sup>14</sup>

The importance of the signs that proclaim the character's true gender could be emphasised by the arrival of the actors who appear on the stage soon after Praxagora's opening monologue (27-31).<sup>15</sup> Praxagora does not announce their arrival by telling the characters' names<sup>16</sup> or by mentioning some other characteristics denoting their identities;<sup>17</sup> on the contrary, she misleads the spectator by saying *μη και τις ων ανηρ ο προσιων τυγχανει* ("in case by any chance the person coming is actually a man", 29).<sup>18</sup> One has to lay great stress upon the fact that, in spite of that, no special explanation about their true gender seems to be needed later.

One can assume that there exist elements of costume that were instantly recognizable as gender signs. One of these might be a saffron tunic worn by the women under their male disguise.<sup>19</sup> But it seems likely that the most important element specifying the gender of characters is the mask.<sup>20</sup> In *Ecclesiazusae*, the clue to the main distinction between female and male masks is offered: the female mask is white and pale in comparison to the male one.<sup>21</sup> One can thus say that since Praxagora and her companions do not wear a proper male masks, their identity is – in spite of their male disguise – clear.

The second group of signs is easier to determine, since the signs are described in the text itself. Apart from the instructions of movement and behaviour, given by Praxagora (268-279) and later the chorus (483), Praxagora and her companions mention the beard (*πωγων*; 25, 68, 99, 102, 127, 273, 494), the male garments

<sup>14</sup> Or, as Stone puts it (1981, pp. 410-411), "the actors' female costumes must be realistic, while the male disguises are unconvincing and transparent".

<sup>15</sup> It seems worth emphasising that in *Thesmophoriazusae*, another Aristophanic comedy dealing with the reversal of genders, our spectator might be misled in a similar way: one of the women celebrating the *Thesmophoria* announces Kleisthenes' arrival and refers to him as to a woman (571-573). Later again, Kleisthenes' gender is not set in doubt even though earlier Mnesilochos (141-143) makes some effort to question the true gender of another effeminate man, Agathon.

<sup>16</sup> As she does in 41, 46, 49, 51.

<sup>17</sup> As she does in 33-34.

<sup>18</sup> In addition to that, the figures who appear might use the masculine grammatical form: cf. Ussher's edition (Aristophanes 1986): *ημων προσιόντων* (31).

<sup>19</sup> As Stone suggests (1981), pp. 411.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Pickard-Cambridge (1991, pp. 218), Dearden (1976, pp. 122), Stone (1981, pp. 19, 411, pp. 422-423).

<sup>21</sup> The Second Woman compares bearded female faces to a cuttle-fish (126-127), while Chremes compares them to shoemakers (385-386); according to the commentators both remarks refer to paleness. Cf. Ussher (Aristophanes, 1986), pp. 93, pp. 129-130, and Sommerstein (Aristophanes, 1998), pp. 149, 175.

(ἱμάτια (ἀνδρεῖα), γλαῖνα; 26, 40, 75, 99, 315, 333, 341, 353, 410, 507, 512, 527, 544), the shoes (ἐμβάδες, Λακωνικαί; 47, 74, 269, 507, 508, 542), and the walking stick (βακτηρία, σκύταλον; 74, 76, 78, 150, 276, 509, 543, 546). In addition to these, the women mention their efforts to get dark skin (63-64) and hairy bodies (60-61, 65-67). It seems likely that the costumes of Praxagora and her companions consist of large male *himations* worn over a female purple *chiton*. They are instructed to wear it in a special way (cf. 98-99: λήσομεν ξυστειλάμεναι θιμάτια) so as to hide their female bodies. In addition to this, women wear men's shoes (cf. 47), which would probably be funny because of the extra size and inexperience of women walking in them (this point without any doubt gains its theatrical effectiveness from a male actor).

A very important sign of male gender seems to be the beard. The importance of it is underlined at least twice in the comedy: the beard is said to have played an important role in turning Agyrrhios (102) from a male prostitute "into a real 'man' both in the political sense ... and in the sexual sense".<sup>22</sup> The beard of Phormisios (97) might<sup>23</sup> be a substitute for female genitalia.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, the razor has been regarded as the most important element of feminine accessories,<sup>25</sup> and is therefore related to another category, which Aristophanes seems to find extremely interesting in connection with sexual difference. Effeminate men are associated with the beardless mask and the use of a razor:<sup>26</sup> in *Thesmophoriazousae* two of them play essential parts:<sup>27</sup> if Agathon helps Mnesilochos to look and behave like a real woman, Kleisthenes discloses his true identity. In *Ecclesiazusae* the effeminate man, "who looked like a woman, i.e. who did not wear, or could not grow, a beard",<sup>28</sup> namely Epigonos (167), does not physically appear on the stage, but is only referred to, being in the audience. He becomes a disturbing element and causes one of the women, while rehearsing for her male part in the *ecclesia*, to make a mistake that could disclose her true gender.

The matter of shaving seems very interesting since it raises a pure question of logic: if the women are supposed to hide their bodies (ἰδοῦ γέ σε ξαίνουσαν,

<sup>22</sup> Sommerstein (Aristophanes 1998), pp. 148.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 147.

<sup>24</sup> Taaffe (1991, pp. 99-100) argues that Praxagora "describes the sexual marker of femaleness with the name of a man known for his excessive physical masculinity. The simple logic behind this posits that women are not so different from men; they have beards in a different place. Her comments emphasize the fragility of an actor's disguise."

<sup>25</sup> Aristophanes, fr. 332. Cf. *Thesmophoriazousae* (218-231) and shaving of Mnesilochos, with Agathon's razor.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Thesmophoriazousae* and beardlessness of Agathon (160) and Kleisthenes (575).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Zeitlin (1996: II), pp. 385-386.

<sup>28</sup> Sommerstein (Aristophanes 1998), pp. 152.

ἦν τοῦ σώματος οὐδὲν παραφῆναι τοῖς καθημένοις ἔδει. “Listen to you – carding! When you ought not to be showing any part of your body to the men sitting there!”, 93-94), why then does their skin need to be hairy? One can understand this as a mere joke but cannot deny that in the light of theatricality, the abandoned razor might suggest and point to the hairy actors playing non-hairy women as well. The same can be said in connection with dark skin, which is interesting as a striking contrast to women’s pale masks as well. Regarding walking sticks, Rothwell’s<sup>29</sup> remark is interesting: he refers to them as to “virtual” phalli. His idea is no doubt attractive in our context, but it seems very difficult to prove.

Another sign is worth mentioning in this context: the lamp (λύχνος, 1, λαμπάς, 50, δάξ, 978). Praxagora’s first words are addressed to a lamp (1-18); for our spectator, the lamp is an indication of darkness, or more specifically, of the twilight. Imagining the twilight must have been – in spite of the fact that the performance is going on during daylight hours – as easy as taking the *orchestra* for an Athenian street. But the remarks about the lamp(s) and the admonitions about the time of day continue (cf. 20, 27, 50, 83, 105, 283, 290); moreover, the lamp is connected to singeing (ἀφεύων τὴν ἐπανθοῦσαν τρίχα, “... singeing off the hairs that sprout from them” (i.e. “secret corners of our thighs”), 13),<sup>30</sup> another important and symbolic action of female sex, and might later become even the surrogate for the phallos (First old woman says to Epigenes, “pointing to his erect phallus”: τοῦ δαὶ δεόμενος δ᾿ ἔχων ἐλήλυθας, “Well, what were you after, coming here with a ... torch?”, 978),<sup>31</sup> the most obvious sign of the male gender. Thus one cannot help concluding that the lamp might have some extra meaning: it might be the indicator which keeps warning our spectator that he does not really see what otherwise – outside the theatre, where other rules operate – he can clearly observe.

To conclude, the attributes defining gender are in the first place signs that help a spectator to recognise a male actor as a male or a female character. But in connection with the male actor representing a female character in male disguise, they raise questions about gender in general. The words of A. Kuhn,<sup>32</sup> written on the subject of cross-dressing in the films, may be quoted in this context: “the socially constructed nature of sexual difference is foregrounded and even subjected to comment: what appears natural, then, reveals itself as artifice”.

<sup>29</sup> Rothwell (1990), pp. 84 (note 21).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Thesmophoriazousae* and singeing of Mnesilochos (236-243).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Vetta’s remark (Aristophanes 1989), pp. 251-252.

<sup>32</sup> Kuhn (1985), pp. 49.

### III. Character's role

C. Belsey,<sup>33</sup> writing about boys playing women in Shakespearean drama, points out that Shakespearean female parts show how "it is possible, at least in fiction, to speak from a position which is not that of a full, unified, gendered subject". She formulates the same point as a question in the following way:<sup>34</sup> "Who is speaking when the protagonist speaks?" Later on she sharpens this question in connection with the Shakespearean boys playing women<sup>35</sup> disguised as men;<sup>36</sup> while writing about Rosalind disguised as Ganymede and her/his mocking lines about women (*As You Like It*, IV, I, 191 - 4), she convincingly argues:<sup>37</sup> "But if we imagine the part played by a male actor it becomes possible to attribute a certain autonomy to the voice of Ganymede here, and in this limited sense the extra-textual sex of the actor may be seen as significant".

Praxagora's speech (214-240), which later persuades the assembly to hand the government over to women and contains some stock stereotypes about women, has to be emphasised here. Her speech, full of stereotypes about women, can be easily compared to the exaggerated description of women's offences by which Mnesilochos sets his disguised gender in doubt at the *Thesmophoria* (*Thesmophoriazusae*, 466-519). One might assume – leaving the logic of the plot aside, by which Praxagora's words can be taken in accordance with her deceptive plan – that the man, whom Praxagora impersonates, gains a kind of "autonomy" and thus speaks for himself. Thus Aristophanic comedy, by means of the convention of male actors playing roles of women, gains a new and autonomous role, represented by a female character, who is played by a male actor.

### IV. Actor's role

The mixture of elements of both sexes, and the incongruity, created by a male actor wearing a woman's mask and male attributes at the same time, is set in a new context when later Praxagora and her companions decide to rehearse for their

<sup>33</sup> Belsey (1985), p 180.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 181.

<sup>35</sup>The difference between Shakespearean boys playing women and male actors playing women in the Greek theatre has to be emphasised. In Shakespearean theatre, the difference between actors playing male characters and those playing female characters was established: the difference was not in their gender but it was in their age. What is important is the existence of the difference, though it was a convention. In the Greek theatre, the difference was not established. The most evident proof of this is the convention of only three, or in some cases four, speaking actors itself.

<sup>36</sup> She deals especially with Rosalind as Ganymede in *As You Like it*, Julia as Sebastian in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and Viola as Cesario in *Twelfth Night*.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 183.



political action (116-240). As in other Aristophanic comedies dealing with change of costume, the disguise act is set on stage, with someone directing the action of such a metamorphosis.<sup>38</sup> But the situation differs from other plays since, instead of one (*Thesmophoriazusae*) or two (*Acharnians*, *Frogs*) persons ready to assume disguise, the whole band of women disguising themselves is brought on stage, with one of them, Praxagora, as the chief-in-command. Besides, the changing in other comedies is limited to man changing to man (*Frogs*), man changing to woman (*Thesmophoriazusae*), or woman changing to animal (*Acharnians*). In *Ecclesiazusae*, our spectator watches the male actor playing the woman who is trying to teach other male actors playing women how to look and behave like men. This extreme situation must have been particularly effective and must have provoked certain questions in the mind of our spectator, even if only unconsciously. It raises the issue of *mimesis* and thus “focuses attention on the status of theatre as illusion, disguise, double dealing, and pretence”.<sup>39</sup> The expressions προμελετᾶν (117) and ἀκριβοῦσθαι (162) imply the theatrical rehearsal, while the term αἰκαθήμεναι (165) is a comic (with its feminine grammatical form) allusion to the audience in the *ecclesia* and at the same time a direct comic address to the theatrical audience as well.

Such an allusion, together with the references, such as the one to Epigonos (167) already mentioned, which happens during the rehearsal,<sup>40</sup> implies that the actor steps out from his character and appears as if he is speaking for himself; he thus gives the appearance of a kind of transgression from the character he is performing to the status he has as an actor. It has to be pointed out that modern illusionistic appreciation of the theatre leads many scholars to take this element of Aristophanic comedy as a break of illusion. But K. McLeish<sup>41</sup> points out that the question is not about “break in illusion, because the audience is as much part of the performance, and of the illusion, as the actors”. F. Muecke<sup>42</sup> sharpens the point by describing the audience “which is drawn into the play” as “a hypothetical audience written into the play, at which the audience present in the theatre is invited to laugh”. If, as far as the mere plot is concerned, the audience – like it or not – plays the audience in the *ecclesia*, then, by the logic of theatricality, the audience play the audience in the theatre. In the same manner, the male actor plays not only the female character disguised as a male, but by producing this effect establishes

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Acharnians* (739-747), *Frogs* (494-502, 527-541, 589-604), *Thesmophoriazusae* (213-267).

<sup>39</sup> Zeitlin (1996: I), pp. 361.

<sup>40</sup> Another allusion, extremely interesting from the theatrical point of view is Praxagora's address to a hypothetical attendant of the *ecclesia* (129).

<sup>41</sup> McLeish (1980), pp. 92.

<sup>42</sup> Muecke (1977), pp. 57 (note 39).

a new part, the part of the actor. Having in mind a male actor, a female character, a male character-in-disguise, who acquires "autonomy" – as we have tried to prove following C. Belsey<sup>43</sup> – with the help of a male actor, one can say that the number of roles increase again, gaining the new role of the actor, who here, paradoxically, seems to be of female gender.

## V. The story of an actor and his characters

At this point another convention seems to be of crucial importance in the light of our problem: the convention of three, or in some cases as far as Aristophanes' comedies are concerned, four<sup>44</sup> speaking actors. The latter implies that *the problem of male actors playing women disguised as men* does not arise only when Praxagora and her companions appear on stage in men's disguise,<sup>45</sup> but in the play as a whole. In connection with it, *the problem of male actors playing women disguised as men* seems to gain another dimension. A whole new dimension might be established within the borders of "plot reality" and "performance reality":<sup>46</sup> the story of the actor, "told" by the actor and the roles he is performing in one production, the story for understanding of which all the parts that one actor plays in one performance are relevant if not crucial. The modern reader, due to the lack of knowledge of the way as to how the parts among actors were distributed,<sup>47</sup> cannot re-establish it with certainty, but also cannot deny its importance.

Let us mention one example and thus propose the possible way of reading "the story of the actor". In the scene following the women's return from *ecclesia* (520-729), some editors<sup>48</sup> place together on stage not Blepyros, Praxagora, and Chremes as do other critics,<sup>49</sup> but Blepyros, Praxagora, and Neighbour. One can assume that the role of Praxagora might thus have been played by the same actor as Chremes.<sup>50</sup> This seems particularly interesting in connection with Praxagora's speech mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Chremes comes from the

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the beginning of the third chapter.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Pickard-Cambridge (1991), pp. 149.

<sup>45</sup> That is from Praxagora's opening monologue till the exodus of the chorus (1-310), from the chorus' return till Praxagora's likely exit into the house (478-519), and perhaps even during Praxagora's political speech (520-727).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. McLeish (1980).

<sup>47</sup> Our reading does not set out a new view concerning this specific problem but rather points at some cases that might contribute to the reading of *Ecclesiazusae* in this manner.

<sup>48</sup> Namely Van Leeuwen (Aristophanes, MDCCCCV), Vetta (Aristophanes, 1989) and Sommerstein (Aristophanes, 1998).

<sup>49</sup> Rogers (Aristophanes, MCMLXXII) and Ussher (Aristophanes, 1986).

<sup>50</sup> It has to be stressed that this is not Sommerstein's view, which gives the lines of the Neighbour to the fourth actor (Aristophanes 1998, pp. 32).

assembly and reports to Blepyros of what has happened in the *ecclesia* (427-433, 441-444, 446-450, 452-454). The comparison of the two speeches shows the following: as has already been mentioned, Praxagora makes some remarks full of prejudices about women's behaviour, while Chremes, on the contrary, does not say anything bad about women. Chremes' speech is logical according to the plot, since he is a man of rules, a citizen obedient to any government. But on the level of theatricality this situation might be understood in another dimension. The same actor first, playing Praxagora, gives a speech full of prejudices towards women, and later, playing Chremes, utters words that would fill any woman with pride. This striking difference, based on the gender reversal, might be regarded as an example of how the convention can be used in its most effective, if not subversive, way.<sup>51</sup>

If we have first argued that the plot of *Ecclesiazusae* itself implies the importance of awareness of the convention of male actors playing roles of both genders, since it requires very transparent signs in order not to confuse the spectator (although sometimes signs are deliberately used to set a spectator in doubt) and later proposed that the male character-in-disguise with the help of a male actor becomes an autonomous role which is fulfilled by the role of "an actress", who impersonates the man-in-disguise, then our last point should be that *the problem of male actors playing women disguised as men* is not present only when the actors are physically on stage, but – with the convention of only three speaking actors and the story which develops through all the parts that one actor performs – in the play as a whole.

### Conclusion: Introducing Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*

In my essay, I have tried to show the influence of two conventions of the Greek theatre on the comedy of *Ecclesiazusae*. But does this influence bear any importance for the modern reader/spectator?

Let us take a risk and propose that stage directions concerning the opening scene of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*, with their special status they have as "literary productions",<sup>52</sup> imply at least a part of the answer to this question. One can first notice, reading the stage instructions concerning the opening scene of *Ecclesiazusae*, from taciturn descriptions to the almost wordy preface (containing the whole story) of B. B. Rogers, and to the latest editions, as listed in the Appendix,

<sup>51</sup> I cannot refrain from exploring an idea that is not supported by any relevant argument except the hilarious effect that might be produced by it: Chremes compares Praxagora's beauty with the beauty of Nikias (428). Would it not be extremely effective if the actor playing Chremes (and before that Praxagora) wore a character mask inspired by the face of Nikias?

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Introduction.

how the directions are marked by the descriptions implied in the mere text of *Ecclesiazusae* and historical evidence concerning the classical theatre. We can assume that they are marked by conventions and characteristics of contemporary theatre as well.

One can see that – with the only exception of Henderson's description of Praxagora's mask – the stage directions listed do not mention the conventions of the Greek theatre. Are thus the conventions really only the subject of mere history? Or are they dead only as far as literary status of the comedy is concerned? Are they of any use for the modern theatre? Moreover, can they be regarded and understood as the beginning of a quest for a new Aristophanes, an Aristophanes, who will cast doubt first of all on the conventions of the modern theatre?

If the answer to the last question is yes, is an introduction without a note on the conventions really a proper introduction to "literary" *Ecclesiazusae*?

**Andreja Inkret**

University of Oxford, University College

Oxford, OX1 4BH, UK

e-mail: [andreja.inkret@univ.ox.ac.uk](mailto:andreja.inkret@univ.ox.ac.uk)

## Bibliography

### A. Editions

1.
 

Aristophanes (MDCCCCV), *Ecclesiazusae*, cum prolegominis et commentariis edidit J. Van Leeuwen, Lugduni Batavorum.

Aristophanes (MCMLXXII), III: the *Lysistrata*, the *Tesmophoriazusae*, the *Ecclesiazusae*, the *Plutus*, with the English translation of B. B. Rogers, London, Cambridge, Massachusetts (London 1902).

Aristophanes (1986), *Ecclesiazusae*, Edited with Introduction and Commentary by R. G. Ussher, London (Oxford 1973).

Aristofane (1989), *Le Donne all' Assemblea*, a cura di M. Vetta, Fond. Valla.

Aristophanes (1998), *Ecclesiazusae*, edited with translation and commentary by A. H. Sommerstein, Warminster.
2.
 

Aristophanes (1980), *Acharnians*, edited with Translation and Notes by A. H. Sommerstein, Warminster

Aristophanes (1994), *Thesmophoriazusae*, edited with translation and notes by A. H. Sommerstein, Warminster.

Aristophanes (1996), *Frogs*, edited with translation and notes by A. H. Sommerstein, Warminster.

Poetae Comici Graeci (MCMLXXXIV), ediderunt R. Kassel et C. Austin, vol. III 2: Aristophanes, Testimonia et Fragmenta, Berolini et Novi Eboraci.
3.
 

W. Shakespeare (1987), *As You Like It*, ed. A. Latham, London and New York (1975).

### B. Books and articles

- W. G. Arnott (1993), "Comic openings", *Drama* 2, pp. 14-32.
- D. Bain (1987), *Actors and Audience, A study of asides and related conventions in Greek drama*, Oxford.
- R. Barthes (1972), *Critical Essays*, trans. R. Howard, Evanston.
- C. Belsey (1985), *Disrupting sexual difference: meaning and gender in the comedies*, in J. Drakakis ed. *Alternative Shakespeare*, London, New York pp. 166-190.
- B. Bennett (1990), *Theater As Problem*, Ithaca and London.
- M. Bieber (1961), *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater*, Princeton.
- M. Carlson (1990), *Theatre Semiotics, Signs of Life*, Bloomington and Indianapolis.

- C. W. Dearden (1976), *The Stage of Aristophanes*, London.
- K. J. Dover (1972), *Aristophanic Comedy*, London.
- P. E. Easterling (1997), *Form and Performance*, in P. E. Easterling ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge, pp. 151-177.
- K. Elam (1980), *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, London and New York.
- E. Fischer-Lichte (1984), *The Dramatic Dialogue - Oral or Literary Communication?*, in H. Schmid and A. Van Kesteren ed. *Semiotics of Drama and Theatre*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, pp. 137-173.
- E. Fraenkel (1936), *Dramaturgical Problems in the Ecclesiazusae*, in: *Greek Poetry and Life, essays presented to Gilbert Murray*, Oxford, pp. 257-276.
- P. Ghiron - Bistagne (1976), *Recherches sur les acteurs dans la Grèce antique*, Paris.
- T. K. Hubbard (1991), *The Mask of Comedy, Aristophanes and the Intertextual Parabasis*, New York.
- A. Kuhn (1985), *Sexual disguise in cinema*, in *The power of the image*, London, Boston, Melbourne, Henley.
- P. Mazon (1904), *Essai sur la composition des comédies d'Aristophane*, Paris.
- K. McLeish (1980), *The Theatre of Aristophanes*, London.
- F. Muecke (1977), *Playing with the Play: Theatrical Self-consciousness in Aristophanes*, *Antichthon* 11, pp. 52-67.
- F. Muecke (1982), *I Know You - By Your Rags: Costume and Disguise in Fifth-century Drama*, *Antichthon* 16, pp. 17-34.
- G. Murray, *Aristophanes* (1933), Oxford.
- S. D. Olson, *The Staging of Aristophanes, Ec. 504-727* (1989), *American Journal of Philology* 110, pp. 223-226.
- Z. Pavlovskis (1977/1978), *The Voice of the Actor in Greek Tragedy*, *The Classical World* 71, pp. 113-123.
- A. Pickard - Cambridge (1991), *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. by T. B. L. Webster, Oxford (1968).
- A. Pickard - Cambridge (1968), *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. by John Gould and D. M. Lewis, Oxford.
- M. Procházka (1984), *On the Nature of Dramatic Text*, in H. Schmid and A. Van Kesteren ed. *Semiotics of Drama and Theatre*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, pp. 102-126.
- K. S. Rothwell, Jr. (1990), *Politics and Persuasion in Aristophanes' Ecclesiazusae*, Leiden, New York, København, Köln.
- C. F. Russo (1994), *Aristophanes: An Author for the Stage*, London.

- N. W. Slater (1998), *The Idea of the Actor*, J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin ed. *Nothing to do with Dionysos?*, Princeton, pp. 385-395.
- A. Solomos (1974), *The Living Aristophanes*, tr. A. Solomos and M. Felheim, Ann Arbor.
- L. M. Stone (1981), *Costume in Aristophanic Comedy*, New York.
- L. K. Taaffe (1993), *Aristophanes and Women*, London.
- L. K. Taaffe (1991), *The Illusion of Gender Disguise in Aristophanes' Ecclesiazusae*, *Helios* 18/2, pp. 91-112.
- O. Taplin (1977), *Did Greek Dramatists write stage instructions?*, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 203, pp. 121-132.
- P. Thiery (1986), *Aristophane: fiction et dramaturgie*, Paris.
- A. W. Trendall and T. B. L. Webster (1971), *Illustrations of Greek Drama*, London.
- R. G. Ussher (1969), *The Staging of the Ecclesiazusae*, *Hermes* 97, pp. 22-37.
- F. I. Zeitlin (1996: I), *Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama*, in: *Playing the Other*, Chicago and London, pp. 341-374.
- F. I. Zeitlin (1996: II), *Travesties of Gender and Genre in Aristophanes' Thesmophoriazousae*, in: *Playing the Other*, Chicago and London, pp. 375-416.

**Appendix:**  
**Stage directions as an introduction to *Ecclesiazusae***

(The list includes some older Latin editions and all the editions and translations into English which I have been able to obtain from the Classics Faculty Library and Cambridge University Library.)

T. Lefebvre (ed. and trans.: *Tanaqvilli Fabri Epistolae, quarum pleraeque ad emendationem scriptorum veterum pertinent II, LXIV*, Salmurii M. DC. LIX, pp. 168)

... *Praxagora itaque princeps dramatis in scenam prodiens, lucernam, quae ibi pendebat, furtorum nequitiarumque muliebrium consciam compellat; ...*

H. Holden (ed.: *Aristophanis Comoediae, Cantabrigiae M DCCC LXVIII*, pp. 598)

*In scenae pariete repraesentari plateam sive aream in urbe Athenarum cogitandum est: media conspicitur domus Praxagorae, a dextra parte aditus est ad Pnycem.*

G. Dindorf (ed.: *Aristophanis Ecclesiazusae, Lipsiae MDCCCXXVI*)

(no stage directions)

F. H. M. Blydes (ed. *Aristophanis Ecclesiazusae, Halis Saxonum MDCCCLXXXI*)

(no stage directions)

A. von Velsen (ed.: *Aristophanis Ecclesiazusae, Lipsiae MDCCCLXXXIII*)

(no stage directions)

R. R. Smith (trans.: *Aristophanes, Ecclesiazusae or Female Parliament, Oxford 1833*, pp. VII)

*The Scene lies in the suburbs of Athens. The time, an hour or two before dawn. Praxagora enters habited in male attire, and after suspending a large lamp in a conspicuous place, she thus apostrophizes it.*

J. Van Leeuwen (ed.: *Aristophanis Ecclesiazusae, Lugduni Batavorum MDCCCV*, pp. 5)

*Scena plateam publicam repraesentat ante domus Blepuri Atheniensis et vicini angiportu separatas. Nox est sub diluculum. Ex aedibus suis prodit Praxagora Blepuri uxor, habitu virili, scipionem tenens et lucernam ferens accensam.*

The Athenian Society (trans.: *Aristophanes, The Eleven Comedies II, London MCMXII*, pp. 330-331)

*SCENE: Before a house in a Public Square at Athens; a lamp is burning over the door. Time: a little after midnight. PRAXAGORA (enters carrying a lamp in her hand).*

B. B. Rogers (ed., trans.: *The Ecclesiazusae of Aristophanes, London 1902*)

*The stage represents an Athenian street, with three houses in the background, the houses of Blepurus, Chremes, and the husband of the Second Woman. The hour is 3 A.M. and the stars are still visible in the sky. A young and delicate woman, clad in masculine attire, is standing in the street, hanging up a lighted lamp in some conspicuous place. The woman is Praxagora, the wife of Blepurus, who has just left her husband asleep within, and has come*



out wearing his garments, with his sturdy walking stick in her hand, and his red Laconian shoes upon her feet. And the lamp is to serve as a signal to other Athenian women who have agreed to meet her here before the break of the day. No one is yet in sight: and while she is expecting their arrival, she apostrophises the lamp in mock-heroic style, using such language as in tragedy might be addressed to the sun or moon or to some divine or heroic personage...

T. Bergk (ed.: Aristophanis *Comoedias*, vol. II, Lipsiae MCMXXIII)  
(no stage directions)

J. Lindsay (trans.: Aristophanes, *Women in Parliament*, London MCMXXIX, pp. 1)  
*Enter Praxagora into the street. She commences to hang up a lamp.*

D. Parker (trans.: Aristophanes, *The Congresswomen (Ecclesiazusae)*, Ann Arbor 1967, pp. 9)

*SCENE: A street in Athens, on which front three houses. These are, at the moment, allotted thus: House I, center, Praxagora and her husband Blepuros; House II, stage left, the Second Woman and her husband Pheidolos; House III, stage right, Chremes.*

*The time is early morning; it is still dark. Praxagora emerges stealthily from House I. She wears a long cloak and red slippers, and carries, in one hand, some wreaths, a staff, and a long false beard. The other hand contains a large clay lamp, lit. After a cautious look around, she puts down wreaths, staff and beard, strides purposefully forward, and mock-tragically begins what seems to be an invocation of the sun filched from a Euripidean prologue.*

R. G. Ussher (ed.: Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae*, London 1999 (Oxford 1973), pp. 70)

*The background represents a street in Athens (33). A figure emerges from the back-stage (...). It carries a lighted lamp, thus indicating darkness (near daybreak, 20, 83), in the other hand a stick (74). Its cloak is white, and decorated only at the edges (a man's cloak, 26, 75): it is wearing men's shoes (74).*

D. Barrett (trans.: Aristophanes, *The Knights / Peace / The Birds / The Assemblywomen / Wealth*, London 1978, pp. 222)

*A street in Athens, somewhere between the Pnyx, where the Assembly meets (offstage and uphill, to the audience's left), and the Agora or Market Square (offstage and downhill, right). The doors of at least two houses, those of BLEPYRUS (left) and his NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBOUR (right), open on to the street.*

*It is still dark, but dawn is not far off. A cock crows. The faint glimmer of an oil lamp is seen as PRAXAGORA stealthily lets herself out of BLEPYRUS' house, letting slip a muttered curse as the door-hinge creaks. Before closing the door she gathers up a number of articles from just inside: it is still too dark for us to see what they are, but they include her husband's cloak and shoes, a walking-stick, a false beard and a bundle of ceremonial head-wreaths. Her lamp is of the simple Greek type, a small earthenware vessel with a nozzle for the wick.*

K. McLeish (trans.: Aristophanes, *Clouds, Women in Power, Knights*, Cambridge 1979, pp. 71)

*A street in Athens. Night.*

*A dark figure, hooded and cloaked, comes stealthily in. In one hand is a lamp, with its light low. In the other, a bundle of wreaths made of leaves, and a long walking stick. The figure looks round to see that no one is about, carefully lays down the wreaths and the stick, and then places the lamp on a pedestal – perhaps the stand for a statue, or a low altar – by one of the houses. The light grows, and we see that the figure is a young woman, PRAXAGORA. She is dressed as a man, and carries a bushy false beard.*

*She treats the lamp with reverence, almost as if it is a god. She half-curtseys to it, then remembers she is a man, and bows solemnly.*

D. Sewart (trans.: Aristophanes, *The Ekklesiazusai*, Milton Keynes 1979, pp. 39)

*The scene is a street in Athens. In the background there is a single house-door and an altar. There are two further entrances. That on the right as we look at the stage leads by convention to the town, that on the left to the country.*

*Enter Praxagora from a side entrance. She carries a small lamp and is disguised as a man.*

J. Henderson (trans.: *Three Plays by Aristophanes: Lysistrata, Women at the Thesmophoria, Assemblywomen*, New York, London 1996, pp. 152)

*SCENE: A street in Athens, just before daybreak. A young figure wearing a woman's white, beardless mask enters from a door in the scene-building carrying a lighted lamp, wearing men's clothing and carrying a walking stick, and addresses the lamp in a woman's voice.*

R. Mayhew (trans.: Aristophanes, *Assembly of women (Ecclesiazusae)*, New York 1997, pp. 45)

*A street in Athens. There are three houses set close together, each with a front door and an upstairs window. In this scene the centre house belongs to Bleepyrus and Praxagora. The house on the right is Chremes', and the house on the left belongs to the Man and his wife, the Second Woman. It is still dark, but dawn is about an hour away. Praxagora comes out of her house wearing her husband's clothes and carrying a fake beard, her husband's walking stick, some wreaths, and a lamp. She moves to the left of the house on the left, sets the lamp on a pedestal of some kind, and looks around. She then begins to address the lamp in an almost hymnal tone, as if it were a god.*

A. H. Sommerstein (ed., trans.: *The comedies of Aristophanes: vol. 10 Ecclesiazusae*, Warminster 1998, pp. 45)

*The stage-house represents three town houses. Praxagora comes out of the middle one. She is wearing man's clothes, but her pale, smooth face proclaims her a woman. In her right hand she carries a lamp, in her left hand she is clutching a walking stick and various other objects. She holds out the lamp at arm's length and apostrophises it, declaiming in tragic style.*

## Povzetek

*Aristofanove Zborovalke in problem moških igralcev, ki igrajo ženske, preoblečene v moške*

V Aristofanovi komediji *Zborovalke* se ženske odločijo narediti konec moškimi neučinkovitim političnim odločitvam: da bi lahko vstopile v grško skupščino in izglasovale svojo stvar, se morajo preobleči v moške in jih prepričljivo odigrati. V eseju z naslovom *Aristofanove Zborovalke in problem moških igralcev, ki igrajo ženske, preoblečene v moške*, se osredotočam na odrski motiv pretvarjanja, igranja in preoblačenja žensk v moške; ta je imel po mojem mnenju v grškem gledališču poudarjen učinek, saj so po gledališki konvenciji vse vloge, tako moške kot ženske, odigrali zgolj moški igralci.

Znaki (kostum, gibanje, obnašanje ipd.), ki so Aristofanovemu gledalcu pomagali v moškem igralcu prepoznati žensko junakinjo, ki se pretvarja, da je moški, bi lahko razdelili v dve skupini: v prvo bi sodili s konvencijo trdno zakoreninjeni, bistveni in osnovni znaki, katerih funkcija je v tem, da gledalec v moškem igralcu takoj prepozna in se stalno zaveda »pravega« spola dramske osebe (tak znak je bila v prvi vrsti maska). V drugo skupino sodijo znaki, ki si jih dramska oseba nadene na odru (ali seveda v zaodrju) zato, da bi zakrinkala svoj »pravi« spol pred drugimi dramskimi osebami. Ti znaki so največkrat povezani s komičnim pretiravanjem in s predsodki do nasprotnega spola.

Kombinacija teh dveh skupin znakov, pogojena s specifično vsebino *Zborovalk*, je najverjetneje v grškem gledališču sprožala vprašanja o spolu na splošni ravni. Obenem bi lahko preizpraševala, kje je meja med igralcem in njegovo vlogo: Praksagorin igrani govor (214-240), v katerega junakinja – preoblečena v moškega – vplete marsikateri stereotip o ženskah, nas na primer lahko pripelje do zaključka, da je junak, ki ga Praksagora le igra, v nekaterih trenutkih pridobil na avtonomnosti, saj se je v grškem gledališču na poseben način povezal z igralcem, ki je igral Praksagoro, ki je igrala tega junaka.

Nadalje se zdi v tem okviru pomembna tudi ena izmed temeljnih lastnosti Aristofanovega gledališča, metateatralnost: Aristofani junaki večkrat opozorijo na gledališče kot takšno, bodisi z namigi na igralca, z nagovori občinstva ipd. Aristofan s takšnimi namigi pravzaprav ustvari neke vrste vzporedne vloge igralcev (oziroma, v primeru nagovorov občinstva, gledalcev). V primeru posebne igre v igri v *Zborovalkah* (kar ta prizor pretvarjanja nedvomno je) se zastavi vprašanje, če junakinja, ki igra moškega, ne pogojuje tudi takšne vloge igralke, katere spol je – za grško gledališče zgolj moških igralcev – paradoks posebne vrste.

In nenazadnje, če vzamemo v obzir še konvencijo, po kateri so vse dramske osebe odigrali zgolj trije oziroma štirje igralci, lahko zaključimo, da je problem moških igralcev, ki igrajo ženske, preoblečene v moške, prisoten v celotni komediji: igralci, ki so igrali junakinje, preoblečene v moške, so se namreč v naslednjih prizorih znova pojavili na odru in – čeprav upodablajoč druge junake – s seboj prinesli tudi svojo »zgodbo«, ki so jo v okviru ene komedije pisale vse dramske osebe, ki jih je posamičen igralec upodobil.