



THE BIRTH OF COMEDY

Discussion 3 – Aristophanes' Women

I'm **James Robson** and with me I have **Nick Lowe**, reader in Classics and Royal Holloway College, University of London, **Edith Hall**, Professor of Classics at Kings College London and theatre director **Helen Eastman**, associate artist at Oxford University's Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman drama. We're here to explore women in the plays of Aristophanes - what his characters are like and what, if anything, they had in common with real women of classical Athens.

James: So Nick, I was going to ask you first, we have plays of Aristophanes dating from the mid-420s BC and then suddenly in 411 BC, so mid-way through his career, we get this explosion of women on the Aristophanic stage. What's all that about?

Nick: Women had never had much of a presence in comedy. In Aristophanes' earlier plays as you say, there's very little, of a female presence and they tend to be very marginal kinds of figures. And then suddenly in 411 BC, right in the middle of his career, we have two plays produced within a few weeks of one another - the very famous *Lysistrata* but also the equally brilliant but less performed today, *Women at the Thesmophoria*. Which for the first time put the lives of ordinary Athenian women on the stage and made them the centre of comedy, made them a subject that you laugh with and at. The reasons for that seem to lie partly in comedy's relationship with tragedy. Because tragedy had always, but increasingly during Aristophanes' lifetime, been exploring women's experiences particularly women's experiences as victims, as marginalised figures, as dispossessed presences in their world, as a way of engaging audiences very strongly with the experience of suffering, loss, and devastation. And one thing about that particular year, 411 BC, was that there had been enormous losses in Athenian manpower, the Athenian overreach in attempting to extend its empire into Sicily had gone disastrously wrong and the war was turning against them, their allies were in revolt, the Spartans were building bases on their territory and there's a real sense of the world having changed. And those things come together in a really fascinating way. *Lysistrata* is more about the external situation, it is a highly political play about a desperate moment in the war and the experience of a lost generation and so *Lysistrata* is very much a tragic Euripidean-style heroine.

Helen: The interesting thing about *Lysistrata* is how brilliant a central idea it is, how much cultural agency it's continued to have because the idea of women going on a sex strike as a way to protest is so fundamentally simple and theatrical and asks so many wide-ranging

questions about power because really it's the only thing they have to wield in terms of having any power. That as a play it's continued to be produced and produced and produced, particularly at key political moments in history - obviously as a protest against the invasion of Iraq, we saw 7,000 different readings of *Lysistrata* across Europe and America. So it's continued to have an iconic cultural relationship despite the fact that the characterisation of the women is quite reductive.

James: I love this idea of, especially in the *Lysistrata* I think, of using women to explore the topic of war. It's what happens in the *Iliad* for example too - we have five books of war in the *Iliad* and then book six we see what life is like in the city of Troy and you get those glimpses I feel in *Lysistrata* too. Nick's talk a bit about the women in the plays, Edith, how they got there and also talked about women in Tragedy, but our sources for women's lives in ancient Athens are pretty few and far between. What can we say in general about women's lives and experiences in this city in this era?

Edith: We used to think that women were very secluded and veiled and didn't have much access to public life at all. That was the pretty much dominant view until about 100 years ago whereas in some other Greek cities like Sparta, women could be very powerful and could exercise alongside the men, they couldn't in Athens. That has been quite substantially revised, in the light of increased interest in women in religion. It's quite clear that women were quite prominent publically in rituals which took place at the Acropolis, processions and sacrifices of the city. They were also allowed a role at the public funerals of the war-dead as well as at private funerals. The problem is that there's an ideal consistently expressed by all the male ancient sources and most of the Athenian sources are of course male, that women should be not very much seen and not very much heard, that they shouldn't be named in public and that actually your wife's name being known was in itself a suggestion that she'd been too free with her favours. Now we're fighting that ideal all the time, the most famous source of all is in Thucydides, it's set in 431 when Pericles is speaking to the entire public of Athens about the funerals for the war-dead and famously tells the women not to too noisy or anything other than their own natures and to make sure they didn't get spoken about too much, you know. How do we read that? People always used to read it as a description of classical Athens and that actually the women were silent and subdued. I see it as prescriptive - they're making so much noise, they're so angry at the loss of their sons and husbands and fathers and brothers, they're howling like when we see a video of traditional middle eastern funerals, the noise that the women make, and Pericles is trying to shut them up.

And I think that in 411 you had got a civic crisis and you had got a lot of very, very angry women being very voluble and in some way or another that is mediated in these plays. The final point is that the high priestess of Athens from at least about 430 BC who was a prominent, respected, elderly virgin from a very, very old family and may well have been in

audiences of comedies as well as tragedies, one of the very few women who I think was able to be there, was called Lysimachae which means 'she who sets the army loose' or 'she who dissolves the army' is almost identical to the name Lysistrate or Lysistrata. There is undoubtedly the shadow of the real life priestess of Athens underneath *Lysistrata* which raises the question whether she had said 'boys enough is enough'.

James: I think it's really interesting this tension between the ideal on the one hand, and perhaps how life is lived by the women on the other and then also the changing roles that women inevitably had during the Peloponnesian war as more and more men in the city were dying and so women were inevitably having to take on different positions and perhaps even be breadwinners of households and things like that. The concentration in your description there has largely been on the citizen women of Athens but could you say a few words about the rest of them too? Because Athens in the 5th century had a huge number of residents, of immigrants as well and also quite a large slave population.

Edith: It did, in fact there were more in total slaves and resident foreign women. It's incredibly difficult for us to access their lives - they do appear in minor roles in Aristophanes, they come along with their mistresses. But just as Aristophanes' heroes tended to be from this upper working class or peasant community when they were men, he just takes the same class it seems when they were women. The joy of the *Lysistrata* is that they come from many different cities, that we actually get a Spartan woman called Lampito bounding onto the stage who's incredibly strong. We get women from different places so we get regional variations. We don't get any important women who are slaves though like Xanthias in *The Frogs*, we don't get that, we do not get a developed female comic slave role.

James: Sure and most of the slave parts are small and we also get these lurid characters, these prostitute figures as well who our best guess is would come from a foreign immigrant class as well because prostitutes tended to be of foreign origin?

Edith: Well we don't actually even know. There's a huge debate as to when you have one of the ubiquitous dancing girl who comes onto the festival scenes at the end or sometimes they come on to represent an abstraction like reconciliation. We do not know if these are men dressed up in ridiculously padded clothes to look like naked girls or whether they are actual naked girls, we actually don't have any idea and don't believe anybody who says we do.

James: Okay 411 BC Nick has already talked about the *Lysistrata* and the *Women at the Thesmophoria* where we get presented with women on stage, housewives on stage suddenly. And what strikes me is the fully formed nature of the stereotype that seems to be connected with them. So Helen could you talk about the housewives of Athens as represented in Aristophanes' plays?

Helen: There's a strong stereotype about the lazy, drinking, very funny, bad-mouthed housewife that comes through in *Lysistrata*. Although there is a lot of variation within those characterisations. I mean it's important to remember it's comedy and they are satirical portrayals in the same way that the men are therefore while they may be rooted in some kind of truth, they are also rooted within a comic tradition. But the important thing is they're there and in some ways a presence in comedy and they are funny and powerful is almost as important than how the stereotypes are working because invisibility is almost the worst thing socially, to be invisible from the comic scene is almost worst that to be visible and highly satirised because once you're there and highly satirised you sort of an accepted part of the social fabric.

Nick: Something that people are probably familiar with in highly segregated societies on gender lines particularly in the Mediterranean world is the way that women's society forms a kind of little world within the world. And one of the things you see very strongly in Aristophanes' plays about women is that the women have their own network of communications, of religious festivals, of mutual support frameworks that the men are excluded from and sometimes there is an actual religious taboo - the Thesmaphoria was a festival to which men were not even allowed to know what was going on at the religious festivals. So within that secret self-contained but highly networked world of women, there's an enormous possibility for comic conspiracy plots and I think one of the things that strike us very strongly about Aristophanes' plays about women is the sense of women's solidarity and their ability to act as a society within society which has its own strength precisely because it's excluded from male discourse and male participation.

James: So Aristophanes' plays as you've suggested can be a very good source for social history, for what went on in women's lives because women feature so little in some of our sources. I mean, Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War famously has next to no women in it. But in what way was the portrayal of women in Aristophanes' plays reflecting some of the male paranoias about female activity.

Nick: Something you notice from the 4th century orators is that Athenians are deeply paranoid about legitimacy of citizenship and one of the weirdest of all the Aristophanic fantasies is that women are swapping babies around and faking pregnancies and then using slave babies smuggled in the back-door and passing them off as their own children. There's also enormous paranoia, or although I think comic paranoia to a certain extent, about the legitimacy of one's own children. There's an image in so many of the plays about women of the husband going out the front door in the morning and the lover coming in the back-door ten minutes later and this in part reflects the tensions created by Pericles' citizenship law which restricted citizen rights very tightly to those of Athenian birth on both sides. A lot of political

feuds are fought out through attempts to cast aspersions on one's political opponent's citizen birth and you can see those anxieties, those paranoias being played out not entirely to comic effect in the way the comic stereotype of women as sex-crazed and congenitally duplicitous emerges in Aristophanes' comedies in the late 5th century.

James: OK thank you. Thanks again to my guests Nick Lowe, Helen Eastman and Edith Hall.