

STEPHANIE JONES

How does Aristophanes portray women in *The Poet and the Women* and *Assemblywomen*? How accurate a portrayal of the life style of contemporary Athenian women are these plays likely to be?

In the plays of Aristophanes there are two main themes that stand out more than any of the other smaller ones; he was a politically motivated playwright and some of his plays suggest that he was quite anti-feminist. However, men of ancient Athens it seems have a perception that their wives are alcoholic nymphomaniacs; that they are always drinking neat wine and at the women only festivals all that the women do is drink. This of course is highly unlikely. I am analysing two of Aristophanes' comedies, 'The Poet and the Women' and 'Assemblywomen'-It is not known for definite but The Poet and the Women was probably performed at City Dionysia in 411 B.C. This play is unusual compared with some of the others as it has little relevance to politics in Athens at that time. Assemblywomen was first performed around the late 390's B.C. it is known for definite that it was performed as the closing lines of the play are- " March out, march out with a lusty shout; and loud victorious cries; for a play that ends with a good blow out is sure to win first prize"

The Poet and the Women is set during the Thesmophoria, a women only festival thought to be held in the Greek month Pyanopsian; roughly the equivalent to October. Euripides, a tragic poet famous for being quite a misogynist, (whether this is fact or fiction nobody really knows) is worried for his life as he knows that the women will be getting together and talking about what they can do to him. Euripides thinks that they are plotting to kill him and so devises a plan to find out what they are planning to do; his father-in-law (mnesilochus) dresses as a woman and goes to find out what the women are plotting, however, he gets caught in the act. Mnesilochus then uses some parodies from Euripides' plays to try to get himself out of the situation. Needless to say they don't work.

Assemblywomen was written after the Peloponnesian War and so we know that Athens has not long returned to a democracy. It is almost the complete reverse of The Poet and the Women as Praxagora and her fellow female friends all dress up as men in order to go to the assembly. However, the women did this for quite different reasons; they wanted to change the

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way of ruling and society in Athens so that it was the women who were in power.

Throughout *The Poet and the Women* Aristophanes does not really leave his standard comic stereotype of the women's behaviour. In this play Aristophanes is able to draw on these familiar stereotypes; when Mnesilochus first enters the Thesmophoria the women are praying to the gods and cursing any men who mean to harm the feminine community. According to Aristophanes women take all kinds of immoral actions such as having affairs, if the child they bear is not a boy they will swap it with a slave for a baby boy; and the thing Aristophanes' women are all known for is drinking so they also curse the person who gives them a short measure. These are just some of the immoral things women are supposed to have done, it proves that Aristophanes has never been to any all women festival or even studied a woman's behaviour. Anything written by Aristophanes is his own perception of what happened.

Later on when the women are talking about Euripides how he describes them in his plays and how he reveals that respectable married women don't always act appropriately, the first woman makes an interesting point that their husbands are so suspicious because, "he's filled our husbands minds with such awful ideas". When Mnesilochus is able to say something he begins by agreeing with the women and is sympathetic, but then he sees his chance to find out if that is really what the women do get up to. He starts mentioning other crimes that the women are supposed to have committed, "Just because he's found out two or three of our tricks and let the cat out of the bag.....I had a friend; just a boy-girl affair you know" by saying this Mnesilochus is trying to catch out any of the women; trying to see if they will agree and tell about their story. This plan backfires on him, he takes it too far and the women begin to suspect something; at this point Cleisthenes enters telling the women there is an imposter at the festival.

So far the women seem to hate Euripides for turning their husbands against them, obviously Euripides is another poet who has a false perception of how women behave when they get together. The women that Aristophanes has described so far are not even remotely similar to what a good Greek wife should be. There are many qualities that a good Greek wife should have; many girls were married by the age of sixteen so that their husbands could "train" them for their needs. A good wife should be economical because her husband will give her a monthly budget that she

must keep to; a wife must therefore also be exact in her management so that she is able to give out food and wine economically. A wife was expected to STEPHANIE JONES

be chaste and clever, but unlike Roman Matron's a husband wouldn't like it if his wife dined with guests and was able to hold an intelligent conversation because it would make him feel slightly threatened. An excellent quality that was always admired in a woman was the ability to wool work, to turn the raw material into clothes for the family.

The first of the parodies performed by Mnesilochus, is of Telephus; Mnesilochus grabs a baby from the first woman and threatens to kill it with the sacrificial knife. When he does stab into the bundle of clothing the truth is uncovered that the baby turns out to be a wineskin Mnesilochus comments, "One passion rules a woman's heart" meaning drinking of course. Mnesilochus then performs parodies of Palamedes, Helen and Andromeda; each failing in turn finally Euripides strikes a bargain with the women at the festival promising that he won't criticize the women of Athens again if they let Mnesilochus go free, but he must rescue Mnesilochus from the Scythian himself. Aristophanes and Euripides complain about how devious women can be, Aristophanes shows just how he can design crafty plots also. Somehow, Euripides must lure the Scythian away from Mnesilochus; to do this Euripides employs a dancing girl to dance for the Scythian whilst Mnesilochus is being smuggled away. Aristophanes has just proved that men can be just as deviant as women.