

Let women speak in the Assembly. Symbolic reversals in Aristophanes' *Ekklesiazousai*

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Dedicated to Toni Bierl

1. Reversals and Normalcy

THE PERFORMANCE of comedy in the Athenian theatre fits within the framework of the subject proposed for this volume because the complex relationship of the symbolic action of dramatic comedy to social realities manifests both cognitive and affective components. Comedy must be treated as more than amusing fiction.

Ancient comedy differs from tragedy in its relationship to social realities. In the case of tragedy, the general outline of the plot is known to the audience as soon as they hear the title of the play because a traditional tale or myth provides a cognitive guideline. To be sure, there was no standardised canon of Greek myths which would have provided a consistent point of reference for the audience, but some version of the myth informing the tragedy would have been heard or seen by most members of the audience at some time. Thus both the audience and the poet or playwright had a roughly common mental map through a familiar landscape. Expectations for the plot or characters of a tragic play would be established on that basis and could then be fulfilled, or, in a few but significant cases, overturned. In difference to this common cultural knowledge, which unites audience and author in the performance of comedies, the performance of tragedy remains rooted in a world of narrative. Any translation into the contemporary world of social action is indirect, and the author does not address or exhort the audience to action through any particular character in the play.

While the narrative and social worlds remain largely distinct in the case of tragedy, in comedy the common knowledge or cognitive guideline which is decisive is based on familiarity with contemporary social problems, a fact which explains the difficulty modern readers often have in comprehending the plot. There are many connections between the world of the play within the boundaries of the

theatre and the social world of the *polis*, bringing the performance of comedy and everyday social experience into closer contact. Some elements of comedy interact with social reality directly, as when characters directly address the jurors and appeal for their support in the vote for the best play in the competition. Comedy may refer not only to the social world but to other elements of the world of the theatre by cultivating a humorous element at the expense of traditional myths used in tragic theatre, a technique we might call the intertextuality of paratragedy.

The relationship between drama and social realities can also be explicated by taking a closer look at the concept of myths. I would propose that Greek myths, with very few exceptions, are very different from so-called charter myths. This term was coined by Bronislaw Malinowski to express the direct correspondence between the narrated and the social worlds. In this type of 'in the beginning' tale, a social institution is represented and reinforced as divinely or heroically mandated and thus unchanged and unchangeable. This type of myth is a narrative charter serving a similar purpose to written foundation charters in our society today. However, Malinowski's model does not fit Greek myths, as these, rather than upholding and reinforcing social institutions, stand in a paradoxical and contradictory relationship to social realities. Greek myths often describe the inversion or contradiction of social mores and institutions. Walter Burkert has explained this inversion as a result of the tension between the rules governing human beings as social beings *vs.* those which apply to humans in terms of raw biology. For example, societies discourage physical aggression between their members, but myths often present the *homo necans*, man as a killer. Myths are full of violence and forbidden acts, thus constituting symbolic narratives which invert social norms. According to Burkert, this locates myths in a position closer to human nature 'red in tooth and claw,' a reality which is more fundamental and instinctive than that based on social constructs. As expressed in his Gifford Lectures of 1989, traditional rites are bound to the 'tracks of biology.'

I have reservations about such a schematic connection between myth and reality, whether social or biological. Instead, I will deal with reversals according to the model of the reversed world and the model of symbolic action as described by Victor Turner and Barbara Babcock. Within this framework the structure of reversals is not dualistic, because even when social rules are reversed in the course of ritual process, other rules, namely the rules of the dramatic game, still obtain. Thus the inversion that takes place cannot be predicted as the world of ritual is not the exact opposite of the normal world, but rather a world of its own, for which Turner uses the term *communitas*.¹

1 Babcock 1978. Excellent introduction by Bräunlein 1997. For application to theatre see Turner 1982, Schechner 1990, Bierl 2000:11-104 is also outstanding in connecting ritual and theatricality in Old Comedy.

This model sees the audience as players of the game who are changed in the process. The 'normal' world which they re-enter from the theatre is also changed in their perception, because the rules according to which it functions are no longer limited to a perceived 'natural' course, but have been expanded and opened to alternatives by the experience of new rules in the dramatic *communitas*.

Looking again at comedy on the basis of this model, it is striking to note that a certain mythical element has been attributed to the later comedies of Aristophanes, which have been commonly described as 'comedies of escape' or 'fairy tales'. Despite their fanciful elements, a social role has also been attributed to them, especially since the sixties, when interpretation tended to treat the comic world of Aristophanes as a utopia. This puts comedy in a third category, separate from mere fantasy or fiction on the one hand and the presentation of realisable political programmes on the other. Instead, the 'world' of Aristophanic comedy is unrestricted by reality but nevertheless real to the author and audience with their common cultural experience in ancient Athens.

One element of common experience besides everyday social life which is especially relevant in the case of comedy are traditional festivals with their complex ritual actions. When used as a basis for comedy, these festivals and the traditions behind them can be seen as mental maps which establish certain expectations or set up the basis for surprises. This may be because festivals themselves have a utopic element: they are real social experiences, but are outside the natural or normal course of everyday life. Thus when actors and audience enter into the socially constructed space and fixed period of time of a festival they are in another world which functions according to different rules which will soon give way to the rules of ordinary life. According to Angus Bowie in his valuable study on Aristophanes, each of the plays can be interpreted within the utopic framework of a given festival. The rules of the world of the festival inform the rules of the utopia in the play, and although they are unlike ordinary social norms, they are still a more or less familiar structure known to the author and the audience. It is this sort of model which I consider to be behind the content and characters of Aristophanes' *Ekklesiazousai* and which will inform our interpretation below.

2. *After the defeat. Reversals of identity*

The comedy with the provocative title 'Women in the Assembly' is the earliest extant play by Aristophanes, the hero of comic poets, written after the bitter defeat of the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War. The years following the war were:

'... one of the hardest and most humiliating periods in the history of Athens: the defeat and loss of the navy; the loss of the Empire and its tribute; the siege and capitulation to Sparta, the suppression of democracy; the

oligarchic regimes of the Thirty and the Ten, followed by counter-revolution and the restoration of democracy There was a feeling that the disastrous outcome of the Peloponnesian War had been due to failings in the democratic system of government.²

But when the oligarchy failed as well, turning out to be an enemy scheme, a way to overcome the crisis was urgently called for. One of the experiments which developed in response to this situation, the amalgamation of Argos and Corinth in 392,³ was probably initiated in the year before the performance of Aristophanes' play.⁴ Both Argos and Corinth joined the Theban League against Sparta in the so-called Corinthian War together with Athens. Years of consolidation and recovery were behind the cities, but in the year of the performance of the play which is our topic here, again dark clouds appeared on the horizon in the form of apprehension about the Persians and Spartans joining forces. The Athenians voted to finance the building of a new fleet to cope with the threat, but failed to carry through beyond the vote and actually deliver the money needed to put the plan into action. This kind of political behaviour is ridiculed in the second part of the play.

One result of Athens' losing the war, then, was that the old political structures were called into question and seen as having been responsible for the defeat. Political theory in the fourth century made proposals for change and experimented with mixed constitutions and interstate relations as well as with radical utopias.⁵ This trend is reflected in the *Ekklesiazousai* when the female hero of the play, Praxagora, proposes a grand new design for an Athenian constitution which is a radical utopia. Thus this component of the plot of the play does not present a political programme which the author or audience expects to actually be realised, not least because government by women was unthinkable. However, it does relate to key issues in contemporary political theory. The programme presented by Praxagora is remarkably similar to that of Plato in book five of the *Republic* (see Fig. 1 for a comparison) and the question of dependency has frequently been posed.⁶ So a cognitive guideline is present in the link between an action in the play and contem-

2 MacDowell 1995:301. The author of this statement is British, writing after the loss of the empire; perhaps confident in the policy of the Iron Lady, which was somewhat different to that of Praxagora.

3 Sommerstein 1998, Davies 1995:36.

4 MacDowell 1995:303, Sommerstein 1998:1,6f.: 'not earlier than 391 BC and if in 391 more likely at the *City Dionysia* than at the *Lenaia*.'

5 Davies 1995:36, Schütrumpf 1995.

6 MacDowell 1995:314; Sommerstein 1998 gives a clear cut short comparison 13-20 with the far-reaching thesis that *Eccl.* is the fountain for the whole utopian discourse in Western tradition (p.17). But see the discussion in Dettenhofer 1999:98f. (overall an excellent documentation).

porary political culture. There is also an affective aspect developed in the portrayal of Praxagora as someone who can appeal to the emotions of the majority cleverly and effectively. Rothwell, in his analysis of the political programme put forward in the play, sees this affective element as key to its interpretation, and considers the play:

‘... an expression of the restored democracy. Aristophanes is sympathetic to the principle that the stability of the government must rely on the consent and obedience of the *dēmos*, and, while no great defender of demagoguery, he understands that the persuasion which wins this consent must depend on affective means. Praxagora is therefore not a deceptive manipulator, but a quick-thinking leader.’⁷

Gynaikokratia, women’s reign over the city, is a myth of anti-identity of the male-controlled Greek city-state. Aristophanes uses the idea of women leading the state in a surprisingly positive mode: not only Eirene in *Peace*, but over all *Lysistrata* is a positive character, needed to end the endless war. Other poets of Athenian comedy staged a *gynaikokratia* several times, such as Theopompos in his *Stratitides* ‘Lady Soldiers’ produced around the year 400.⁸ There are also famous but negative mythical examples, *The women of Lemnos* and *The Amazons* among the titles of plays for which we have evidence. Although we do not have enough information to paint a complete picture, it is clear that there is variety in the plots of *gynaikokratia* plays, ranging from the Lemnians and Amazons portrayed as ridiculous and disgusting man-killers and child-haters to the clever and competent women’s think tank in *Lysistrata* which successfully breaks down male privilege. The women’s key to power in *Lysistrata* is to refuse sexual advances from their husbands, whereas in *Ekklesiazousai* the game is reversed and the women legally require every male to meet the sexual demands of every woman who gets a glimpse of him.

The conscious transvestism of the theatre is carried beyond the dramatic convention of male actors wearing women’s clothes. In the *Ekklesiazousai* men wear women’s clothes unwillingly and—in a reversal of the reversal—a male actor, acting as a woman, wears male clothes. Another divergence from other similar plays is that *gynaikokratia* as a permanent institution is not to be found anywhere else except in the *Ekklesiazousai*, a point which has also been brought out by other scholars: ‘The idea of permanent gynaecocratic Utopia may well in 391 have been a complete novelty, something, never ... done or said before (579).’⁹ And I quote Bowie:

7 Rothwell 1990:102.

8 PCG 7, F 55-59. Concerning the issue of lady soldiers see Bierl 2000:100 n. 209.

9 Sommerstein 1998:10.

'In *Lysistrata*, the difference between the violent men and the peaceful women was important: the women had, it is true, some negative traits, such as lustfulness, but in general they were represented in a better light. In *Ekklesiazousai*, by contrast, the women's take-over is rendered more natural not just because the men are feeble but also by the many similarities between the women and their husbands: the women can as easily assume male roles in public life as adopt their clothing.'¹⁰

There has been considerable scholarly debate as to how to interpret the inversion of gender roles in the *Ekklesiazousai*. Taaffe, I believe, goes too far in assuming that gender roles are as easily constructed for the purposes of a play as clothes are changed. Helen Foley, however, points to an important gulf in the plot between the plan and its realization: female conservatism is initially announced, but what actually happens is a revolution. Egalitarianism is the purported aim, but in the end the motivating forces are private interests and the satisfaction of sexual desires. And finally, rather than the scheme ending in the city's *sotería*, chaos ensues.¹¹ These diverse opinions show the difficulties of interpreting this play, and are quite possibly all superseded by MacDowell's statement that Aristophanes originally wrote a play about women's government, unfortunately ran out of good ideas, and tacked another one about communism onto the end (vv. 558ff.).¹² As will become clear in the rest of this discussion, the inversion of gender roles in this play can be interpreted coherently on the basis of a cultural model.

This comedy relates to the cultural experience of the audience in their knowledge of at least one actual society in which women had a significant influence on public life, namely Sparta.¹³ Of course, Athen's arch-enemy could not be presented as a model for Athenian political life, but the example of the Argive women, on the other hand, lay nearly a century back in Greek history.¹⁴ Herodotus, writing some forty years before Aristophanes' play, relates how after the defeat at Sepeia in 494 the women were left in charge because Spartan foul play had resulted in every male Argive citizen being killed. Aristophanes makes an allusion to these women by a clever pun on the name of the battlefield at which the Argive catastrophe took place: the false beards of the *Ekklesiazousai* are called *Sepeiai*, which literally means 'fried cuttle fish.' As we will see, this is not the only connection between this play and the Argive women.

10 Bowie 1993:260.

11 Zeitlin 1999:175.

12 MacDowell 1995:320.

13 Millender 1999. According to Dettenhofer 1999 the utopia is a Spartan program, which is ridiculed by putting it into the mouth of a woman.

14 Auffarth 1995, ch. 5.

I would therefore conclude that the *Ekklesiazousai* is neither an escapist fantasy nor a political utopia, but rather a play which relates the defeat which the Athenians had experienced to the defeat of the Argives, thus building on real experience but making use of exceptional states of affairs with their alternative rules, *i.e.* women being in charge. After the defeat at Sepeia Argos was ruled by women with a competent and successful female general, Telesilla. In the following generation, the Argive women had to cope with the lack of male citizens and make use of any man that came to hand, namely those who had been too young or too old to fight in the battle at Sepeia, as well as slaves and non-citizens, to father the next generation of citizens. Argive women thus had the reputation for arrogance and for despising their husbands who were often significantly younger and/or of lower social status. We will now examine how the *Ekklesiazousai* mirrors the *gynaikokratia* at Argos after the catastrophe of 494.

3. The Argive festival Hybristiká as the model for the *Ekklesiazousai*

3.1 Everything is to be had in common, even women

In the *Ekklesiazousai* Praxagora's proposal to save the *polis* is that everything that is necessary for life should be shared: *koinòn pâsin bíoton, kai toûton hómoion* (590). This point in her programme is not as far-fetched as it seems, especially to our ears: communal property was both a social reality in some Greek societies and part of reform programmes like that of Plato.¹⁵

There is, however, one proposal for communal life that does not fit in a serious constitution, that is, free sex for women and obligatory copulation for men. In the play, men are portrayed as being physically exhausted and apprehensive about becoming impotent because of the overwhelming quantity of females demanding sexual gratification. On the other hand, the women are eager for sex and actively seek male partners. Praxagora proclaims: 'Women shall be free to sleep with everybody. I'm making common property, for any man who wishes, to have sex in order to produce babies (613-15).' And later, when her husband puts the question: 'Well, from your point of view, it makes some sense, you have planned it so that none of you will have an empty hole. But what about men's point ... of view? What will happen to the uglier men? The women will run from the uglier men and go for the handsome ones! (624-26).' What actually happens is that even ugly men are faced with a higher demand than they can deal with, such that after dinners 'women will waylay the men, shouting "Come here!" but the next one: "You have to sleep first with me, then with her!" (694-701).' And later on again, an old woman formulates as a principle of democracy: 'It is not the days of Charixene

15 Dettenhofer 1999:95-103.

now! It's right and proper for these things to be done according to the law, if we live in a democracy' (*Katà tòn nómon taûta poieîn esti díkaion, ei demokratoúmetha* 943-45).

The only limitations on this copulative free-for-all were that female slaves are not allowed to pursue male citizens (721-24) and that girls under twenty—although, as we have seen in the Pandora-Exhibition, that normally girls of twelve and 14 were married¹⁶—are likewise banned from participating in the communal reproductive market. This was obviously an unpopular policy among the men. In the play, a young man, preferring a young girl, says to the aged woman: 'We're not entering those over sixty at present (*sc.* the cases at trial, but here ambiguous formulated); we've postponed them to a later date. We're finishing dealing with those under twenty, first.' But the old woman answers: 'That was under the previous regime, sweetie. Now the ruling is that you must enter us first' (982-86).¹⁷ The young man carries the name Epígonos, a name which is unusual for an Athenian citizen, so that the audience is directed to the famous Epigonoí of Argos.¹⁸

These arrangements, beyond their comic value, suggest that there is a shortage of men at a usual child-rearing age, and a surplus of women. That sexuality is a common good and every man has to do his duty, namely to make children, is not part in other utopian constitutions. Rather, it is a special case which must remind us of the situation of the Argive women after the catastrophe of Sepeia. The community had to react to political and military disaster by reversing its traditions—if the only men to have survived the war are very young and/or non-citizens, patrilinear descent will not work any more, so that the women take over the responsibility for leading the family and community and citizenship is handed down from the mothers to the sons.¹⁹

3.2 *Transvestism and men giving birth*

The *Ekklesiasouzai* also includes unusual practices such as cross-dressing and men having babies. These elements of the play can be better understood by relating them to the evidence for the Argive festival of *Hybristiká*.²⁰ Plutarch (*Mor.* 245e-f) provides an aetiological explanation of certain components of this festival such as cross-dressing by linking them to the defeat at Sepeia just discussed.²¹ On the

16 Reeder 1996:14.

17 Henderson 1987:119 against 'morbid' intentions of the older women demanding sex.

18 *Eccl.* 167; as actor's name 938-1111. Occurs seldom as a personal name in Classical Athens (see LPGN 107); but in Roman times it was extremely common, rendering Roman *Postumus*. Sommerstein *a.l.*

19 Zeitlin 1999:184.

anniversary of that battle, the Argives even up to the present day celebrate the festival of *Hybristiká*. During the festival the women wear false beards, male *chitones* and *himatia*, whereas men are clothed with female *peploi* and veils. The reason for this, according to Plutarch, was that the Argive widows had, after the battle, married non-citizens. In order to maintain the difference in status and to make clear who was in charge, the widows dressed like men and the lower-status husbands had to wear women's clothes as a symbol of their subservience. Since other Greek cities criticized Argos for having had a *gynaikokratia* and, even worse, a *doulokratia*, Argos needed a tradition which could repel this type of slander.²² Thus they created the myth of Telesilla, the idealized poetess and general who prevented the ruffians from Sparta from destroying the city even though there were no men to defend it.

In the play, on the other hand, the reversal of gender roles is portrayed as the result of the wives stealing their husbands' clothes in order to seize power in the assembly/*ekklesia* and not as a way of coping with fate. The husbands are then reduced to wearing their wives' clothes, like Blepyros in 311ff. who dons his wife's saffron dress and Persian shoes.²³ Both gender roles are reversed and, as the result of that, the hierarchy of the gender roles is reversed, as well. Women leave the house and enter the public room, men stay at home and avoid the public. The gendered symbolism of in and out, secret and public, darkness and sunlight runs from the beginning throughout the play.

But Aristophanes goes even further: even the social and biological gender-roles of giving birth are reversed in the play. When Blepyros awakes, he realizes that he is at home and that his own clothes are missing. He finds his stomach upset and leaves the house, looking for a discreet place to relieve himself. Taking advantage of the darkness of night, Blepyros squats down in a quiet place, but because of his constipation is still sitting there hours later when the sun rises and exposes him to

20 Nilsson 1906:371 and 373. 'Nach der Analogie der angeführten Gebräuche werden also auch die Riten dieses Festes auf die Ehe und Ehegebräuche zurückgehen. So wird auch die wunderliche Sitte begreiflich, daß ein Jüngling sich wie ein kreißendes Weib gebärdete. Es war ein Akt sympathetischer Magie, die wahrscheinlich auch der Sitte des Männerkindbettes zugrundeliegt. Man suchte durch die Festgebräuche nicht nur die Eheschließung, sondern auch *das Gebären zu fördern*.' Nilsson gives as a hint to further evidence in Frazer 1900, vol. 1:20, n. †.

21 Plutarch, *Mor.* 245 C-F; abridged in Polyain. *Strat.* 8. 33. Auffarth 1995, ch. 5, Auffarth 1997.

22 Vidal-Naquet 1989. *Ekklesiastousae* as the most pertinent play for his argument p. 197.

23 Bowie 1993:257f. mentions the *Hybristiká* as a rite of transvestism, because they are celebrated in mid-summer like *Skira* (which is explicitly mentioned in *Eccl.* 'But there is no sound evidence for anything of that sort at the Scira.'). but he does not discern the deep roots of the Argive festival in *Eccl.* I find no evidence which supports placing the festival in mid-summer. Nilsson 1906, equates the *Hybristika* with Attic *Gamelia* in the end of winter.

view, especially to the eyes of the audience. His attempt at discretion is thus reversed into vulgarity. MacDowell interprets this scene as follows:

‘Nowhere else is constipation displayed, and the audience is expected to laugh in surprise at seeing something normally hidden from view. The passage reinforces the theme of the play, by showing a man preoccupied with a mundane or degrading activity while his wife is concerned with higher things.’²⁴

I disagree, however, with the view that this is the sum of the purpose of this scene. Rather, Aristophanes needs it for his gender reversal as the male next-best version of giving birth: when Blepyros continues to be unable to move his bowels, he begins to pray to the goddess of birth, to Eileithyia (369-71):²⁵

‘O Lady Eileithyia, don’t stand by and
let me burst or stay blocked up like this;
I don’t want to become the comic shitpot!’

The vulgar humour arises from the fact that men can’t give birth, so that even when, for the purposes of the reversals and the analogy with Argos, the goddess of birth is invoked, the man is made ridiculous by being unable to give birth to anything but ‘shit,’ thus stressing their inability to come to grips with the crisis that their community is in.

The inversion of biological birth, which turns out to be impossible, has its counterpart in the play. When Praxagora comes home, her husband asks why she had gone out wearing his cloak. She answers: ‘A woman who’s a close friend of mine sent for me. She’d gone into labour during the night’ (526-50). He, instead of asking about the health of mother and baby or otherwise showing an interest in the new life, scolds Praxagora for leaving him behind as ‘like a corpse.’ Her main interest, on the other hand, is in rejoicing that the new baby is a boy. Again a striking parallel to Argos after the catastrophe: Blepyros is a corpse on the battlefield, whereas the interest of the women is on the next generation of soldiers who must be born and reared. Indeed, women in fact perform both ‘male’ and ‘female’ functions, taking over in the social and political sphere while still pursuing their biological role as mothers. Men, on the other hand, are completely incapable in either sphere. By using the male inability to give birth to emphasize the Athenian

24 MacDowell 1995:311. In his note 12 he cites other ‘unconvincing’ suggestions.

25 Kleinknecht 1937:71 He does not realize the explicit parallel to the real birth. ‘Das parodische Gebet entspringe einzig der Freude an der augenblicklichen komischen Situation’; cf. Horn 1970:43f.

men's incompetence at dealing with the present crisis, if in no other way than by bringing forward the next generation of citizens, Aristophanes reverses the charge against the Lemnians and Amazons. In those cases, infertility and refusal to become mothers was decried as bringing death to the city, and in other *gynaikokratiai* women also refuse to give birth. Here, however, the issue is inverted and men are blamed for failing to reproduce.²⁶

The reversal just set out belongs to a type known to cultural anthropologists as *couvade* or *Männerkindbett*.²⁷ This phenomenon involves husbands of new mothers staying in bed and wishing everyone to look after them as if they were the ones who had just given birth. The male partner attracts the attention of the friends and relatives to himself, and thus detracts it from the mother and baby, who are therefore forced to struggle alone through the physical and mental adjustment after the birth. So I agree with Helen Foley's interpretation that the men in *Ekklesiazousai* are depicted as drones. I disagree then with MacDowell in finding fault with the 'distinguished author' among modern feminists (*i.e.* Foley) for the view that 'men are reduced to leading a drone-like life of pleasure in a world run by others.'²⁸ MacDowell stresses that Aristophanes wrote his play not for modern feminist authors but for ancient men who would be only too delighted to have a 'drone-like life of pleasure.' In my view, the analogy with the historical crisis at Argos and its commemorative festival provide the explanation for this particular reversal: men are outside the sphere of responsibility because the few who remain are not of a quality to deal with the problems of a community and can only be used as reproductive tools.

3.3 *Wedding song in soldier's boots*

A fine detail of a reversal can be observed in the wedding song in soldier's boots, the song 289-99 with the antistrophe 300-10.²⁹ The women have finally gathered at the appointed place whence they, in chorus formation, set out for the assembly. At this point the women are disguised as old men with walking sticks, beards and cloaks. Their leader Praxagora gives the command to sing 'like old men' as they walk at a farmer's pace (*adoúsai mélos presbytikón* 279f). However, with the third verse they change from marching to dancing, so that the audience is confronted with the women dancing along to the assembly wearing their husbands' Spartan soldiers' boots (*lakonika*). Their song is a popular ditty in telesilleans. Parker, who has analyzed the metres of the songs in Aristophanes, comments: 'It is naturally

26 Bowie 1993:258f.

27 Männerkindbett: Zapperi 1994, Dumont du Voitel 1997.

28 Foley 1982:18.

29 Zimmermann 1985-87:3, 95f.; 1, 137f., Händel 1963:26-29. Parker 1995:526-30.

tempting to wonder whether the chosen metre has any special significance in the context. The evidence connecting telesilleans with weddings songs (see *On Peace* 1239ff.) can hardly be relevant here.³⁰ With a single exception, telesilleans appear in the songs of young women and are usually used in betrothal and wedding songs. The Argive poetess, whose name a later philologist chose to designate this metre,³¹ Telesilla, composed just such Parthenia. And Telesilla is, in the Argive myth, the general who successfully repelled Spartan aggressors with her troop of young women. So in the *Ekklesiiazousai* the song is to be interpreted accordingly: on the level of outer appearance and the words used the she-general commands a military troop—with the lapsus of 299 a/b, where the chorus first sings *philas*, in the next line correcting into *philous*. But the rhythm leads the audience to perceive the ‘soldiers’ on another level as disguised maidens dancing with their clever teacher.

4. *New-and-old order. The reversal of the reversal*

Reversals are one of the most telling features of Greek myth and ritual. Reversals in myths may easily be connected with reversals in rites and rituals. In a symbolic act like the performance of a rite, a reversal can be indicated by a change of clothes, dressing a pole with a mask, or by imagining in narrative a time long ago and beyond recall.

In other papers on Aristophanes I have argued that the common ground between the poet and the audience provide a basis for understanding the structure of the play, using the common experience of a festival as an interpretive key which would have been relatively obvious to the Athenian audience. In fact, the festival which informs the symbolic structure of the play is sometimes explicit in or at least indicated by the title, as in *Thesmophoriazousae*, or the *Dionysia* in *Peace*, the *Mysteria* in *Clouds* and in *Frogs*.³² Some plays, however, have to be subjected to meticulous effort on the part of modern scholars before they can be deciphered, whereas the Athenian audience understood the important structures by signs, masks, costumes, and other props.

30 Parker 1997:528; she deals with *On Peace* 1329–59 on p.290–95, which she calls there ‘This song and *Birds* 1731ff., both featuring telesilleans, are the sole survivors in Greek of a type of processional wedding song which must have provided the model for Catullus c. 61 and ... Ticides fr. 1 Morel.’ On the next page Parker offers examples from Telesilla’s girl’s songs (*PMG* 717) and from Hermippus’ *Stratitides/Stratitotai*, which may come from the parodos (*PCG* 57) and the chorus of that play may have consisted of effeminate young men. Cf. Kassel/Austin *PCG* 5. 585. ‘However, the idea that telesilleans have specifically feminine connotations is hardly tenable in view of *Knights* 1111ff. = 1131ff.’ In my opinion it is the use of telesillians in *Knights* that has to be explained. For further comedies with choruses of soldiers see Bierl 2000:100 n. 209.

31 Hephaestion, see Pfeiffer 1970, Paul Maas, *RE* 5 A 1(1934), 384f.

32 Bowie 1993.

5. Conclusions

We now must take a step back from the content of the play and ask ourselves what the performance of this particular play in its particular time and place meant to its author and audience. Some scholars have taken the inclusion of a mock *Panathenaia* (730-45) as an indication that Aristophanes intends the audience to support the reestablishment of the old order. For example Burkert takes the span from *Skira* to *Panathenaia* as indicative of regeneration but in a cyclical sense as in the coming of the new year, so that the old order is newly established.³³ Bowie, working within an Athenian context, sets up a dichotomy from *Skira* to *Panathenaia*, from chaos (parallel to the plotting of the women) to cosmos (the traditional structures) and sees the performance of the *Panathenaia* in the play as the reversal of the reversal and hence the restoration of the old order. As he puts it, 'It is up to the audience to relate this new world which follows Chremes' Panathenaic parade of pots to the normality felt to be restored after the city's *Panathenaia*.'³⁴ On this scheme a reversed reversal automatically restores the original state of affairs, that which was perceived as normal at the outset. But this cannot be coherently applied to the *Ekklesiazousai* in which the new order is praised and maintained up to the end. Reversals are not simple opposite positions, moves from 'upside down' to 'right side up,' but can be distortions to any degree in any direction, setting the old order topsy turvy, as Victor Turner and Barbara Babcock have shown in their interpretations of rituals and communities

I would see the meaning of this play in its particular place in time as governed by the experimental function of Greek symbolic acts like myths and festivals. Old Comedy, as part of a festival, is the game of reversing the world of the everyday order and acting in the reversed world to test its possibilities.³⁵ This is particularly complex in the case of this play, as Aristophanes is experimenting with events expressed in a festival, itself a symbolic experiment.

As pointed out in the introductory section, comedy makes itself coherent symbolically in part by connecting to aspects of everyday social experience, including symbolic social experience as just indicated, but also including political issues and controversies. Thus we can see how the audience would have understood the play in terms of Athens' contemporary foreign policy, cocking a snook at Sparta and her friends in Athens in its re-enactment of the re-enactment of the failure of Sparta to defeat a community defended 'only' by women. There is also a

33 Burkert 1972:153-77. Burkert 1977:346-54 (= Greek Religion 1985:227-34).

34 Bowie 1993:267.

35 In so far I agree with Dettenhofer's conclusion that *Ekklesiazousai* is still a typical Old comedy in its topicality. But I don't agree that Praxagora's plan is ridiculed by putting it into the mouth of a woman.

bitter tone to the character of Praxagora, the Athenian Telesilla, who is a successful and competent leader, with ideas and the ability to carry them out in action, the type of leader Athens lacked at the time and the lack of which in the past had recently caused her defeat. The lack of a leader would be most keenly felt in the affective response of the audience to Praxagora as the new Telesilla, not the new Pericles, as this would be immediately felt as a wish for something impossible.

Reversals are typical in Greek myth. Reality, normalcy, and the natural course of everyday life is contradicted by alternatives. Old Comedy was the institution in Athenian society whose function it was to imagine alternatives and to criticize existing social realities. It also functioned to experiment with the alternatives in a setting free from the constraints of economics and the political establishment. The rules of this 'game' required that the experiment come to an end with the end of the festival, when the players and audience leave the theatre after going through the symbolic experiment of the comedy.³⁶ But before leaving the theatre they had been changed, and the old order to which they returned outside the theatre could be seen from eyes freshly experienced in symbolic reversal.

36 Auffarth 1991:1-37.

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Fig. 1 Utopian constitution
in Aristophanes' Ecclesiazousae and in Platon, Politeia 5
(based on Sommerstein, Ecclesiazousae 1998, 14)

Regulations proposed in	<i>Ekklesiazousae</i>	<i>Politeia</i>
No private property	590-610	416D 'unless absolutely essential' 464D they have 'no private possessions except their bodies'
No litigation	655-61	464D
Men have no private dwelling-places	674-75	416D
They dine in communal halls	675-88	416E
Their maintenance will be provided by slaves	651-52	416E, 463B, 464C
Women do textile work as hitherto	654	No regulation
Songs will be sung in honour of brave warriors	678-80	468A,D those who have shown cowardice will be prevented from attending
Marriage is not to exist, and all women are to be 'common' to all men	614-15	457C
Rules of sex	615-34	No regulation
No parent has to know who is his child and v.a.	635-36	457D
Every older person will be treated as his parent	636-37	461 D/E
Any two Guardians will regard each other as close kin and behave accordingly	638-50	463C-E
No violence by the young against the old	641-43	465A-B
Punishment for crimes	662-72	Crime doesn't exist

*Fig. 2 Argos
in the fifth century*

	As seen in Argos	As seen by the other Greek cities
ca. 494	At Sepeia Spartans killed every Argive man, using a foul trick. But they did not enter the city	Argive men lacked intelligence
		The Womanish (foul trick) wins, but with bad consequences (for the Spartan king Kleomenes). Herodotus 6.75-84.
	The Argive women put the Spartans to flight. General is the poetess Telesilla	
	The Argive women are forced to marry men of lower social rank (<i>perioikoi</i>)	<i>Gynaikokratia</i> <i>Doulokratia</i>
	Festival of <i>Hybristiká</i> Reversal of gender roles < Women wear beards because they despise their husbands < Men lie in bed and give birth (<i>couvade</i>)	
480	The Argives refuse to partake at the Persian war, because they lack men	The Argives as traitors: <i>Medismós</i>
ca. 460	Battle of Oinoé Together with the Athenians the Argive 'new generation' defeats the Spartans.	
	The <i>epigonoí</i> (new generation) represent themselves as revengers of their fathers (seven against Thebes): Statues in Delphi [SEG 38, 314]	Painting in the <i>Stoa Poikile</i> at Athens

431 - 404	<i>Peloponnesian war</i>	
	Alliance (Corinth) Argos / Athens	
391		Aristophanes' performance of the Argive <i>gynaikokratia</i> as <i>Ekklesiazousai</i>
ca. 303 1. c. AD	Apollo saved Argos (Inscription <i>BCH</i> 32[1908]: 236-58) Sokrates of Argos <i>FGrH</i> 310 F 6 (Plutarch, <i>Mor.</i> 245c-e) on <i>Hybristiká</i>	