

Modern Adaptations and Reperformances of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*

Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* has been a relatively unpopular choice for reperformance due to its unusually disjointed plot and the early disappearance of its dynamic heroine. The productions database at APGRD (the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama at Oxford University) records 89 productions or adaptations of the play between 1450 and 2020, which is the median of all Aristophanic comedies (between a low of 36 for *Knights* and a high of 366 for *Lysistrata*). Moreover, the play's message is so opaque that Praxagora's Athens has been interpreted both as a near dystopia (cf. David, Tsoumpra) and as a kind of comic utopia enabled by the effective and persuasive Praxagora (cf. Rothwell, Sommerstein). This paper argues that the very opaqueness of the play's message provides its adapters with the flexibility to tackle a variety of modern issues as playwrights and directors respond to the social and political issues of their time, especially the changing role of women.

For example, a 1901 modern Greek production (*The Emancipation*), which Georgios Soures adapted from *Ecclesiazusae* and *Lysistrata*, was explicitly reactionary, since it mocked the Greek feminist movement (Van Steen 2000: 91). On the other hand, Spyros Evangelatos responded to the politically, socially, and theatrically conservative military junta by staging an avant-garde, even Brechtian production of *Ekklesiazouses* in 1969. In an essay about her 2015 adaptation *Ἐκκλησιάζουσαι* (*The Congressladies*) at the University of California at Santa Cruz, Mary-Kay Gamel claims to eschew the utopia/dystopia debate about the play and the conservative/progressive debate for Aristophanes in general. Although Gamel's adaptation addresses current issues at the local level (tuition increases, e.g.) and national level (immigration,

e.g., and gridlock in the United States Congress), Gamel’s version of Praxagora, Nancy, explicitly breaks the law and is therefore arrested by the FBI (Gamel 2015).

Even directors and translators who view Praxagora’s reforms as positive do not necessarily see them as possible. Gamel, for example, is explicit on her website about her “feminist approaches to literature and performance” but nevertheless her Congressladies’ reforms fail (Gamel, N.d.). And Greek Art Theatre Karolos Koun recently collaborated with the Greek National Opera on a folk operetta version of the play). This production emphasizes the poetic aspects of Aristophanes’ work even as it views Praxagora’s revolutionary goals as impracticable (“ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΖΟΥΣΕΣ - Η Λαϊκή Οπερέτα.”). Greek Art Theatre’s founder, Karolos Koun, was an avowed leftist who had used Aristophanic comedy to critique right-wing politics, especially that of the military junta.

Finally, progressive aspects in one area of a production can be undermined by other directorial choices. For example, providing roles for women actors was an explicit goal of Serena Sinigaglia’s 2007 *Donne in parlamento* in Milan (Vasta 2007: 9). That production also demonstrated how the *protagonistes* who played Praxagora could have continued to promote her ideas during the final three scenes in the roles of the Neighbor, one Old Woman, and Praxagora’s Female Slave (Capra and Giovanelli 2015). Nevertheless, the production as a whole alienated critics by emphasizing the grotesqueness of the old women and death themes in the “hag” scene (Capra and Giovanelli 2015).

Ecclesiazusae has been a less popular choice for reperformance than (in descending order of popularity) *Lysistrata*, *Birds*, *Frogs*, *Clouds*, and *Peace*, which is likely due to its unusually disjointed plot, the limited role of its chorus, the opaqueness of its message, and the disappearance of its heroine just after the halfway mark. But its central themes—gender,

philosophy, politics, and theater and performance—ensure that it both remains relevant and is flexible enough to adapt to the specific needs of its director and their socio-political context.

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