

Gynecological Recipes in the *Ecclesiazusae*

The gynecological texts of the Hippocratic corpus regularly included recipes and therapies designed to alleviate the symptoms and sufferings associated with female illnesses. These recipes (*ta gunaikeia*), embedded in and affixed as addenda to Hippocratic treatises concerning women's health (Hanson 1991, 235; Hanson 1998, 73), were unique amongst early Greek medical texts (Hanson 1991, 235; 1998, 73; King 1995, 353). By the second half of 5th century B.C. Hippocratic medicine had gained wide currency among non-specialists, infiltrating even tragedy and comedy (cf. Miller 1945). This paper examines how Aristophanes uses these gynecological recipes in the *Ecclesiazusae* in order to further the comedy's principal themes of gender and political inversion.

In the *Ecclesiazusae*, references to gynecological recipes are connected to the role of Praxagora and her group in bringing about a new social and political order in Athens. Near the beginning of the comedy one of the women, viewing her compatriots' attempt to disguise themselves with fake beards, remarks on the ridiculousness of the disguise by comparing the women to "lightly browned" cuttlefish (*sēpiai*) (*Eccl.*127-128, the joke being that the beards, more suited to a darker masculine face, look absurd on a woman's skin that, like the flesh of a cuttlefish, was usually quite pale, Sommerstein 2007, 149). The *sēpia*, as a food item, appears quite often in the therapies of the gynecological texts in the Hippocratic corpus (16 occurrences). They could be used as a remedy for the "wandering womb" (*Nat.Mul.*8.15) or cooked and administered to women after childbirth (*Mul.*45.3). The cuttlefish joke at the beginning of the comedy prefigures the women as ingredients in a therapeutic recipe for Athens, which, through the work of the women, will shortly give birth to a new political system.

The motif of birth continues to be important for the themes of gender and political inversion. During Praxagora's absence, her husband Blepyrus appears on stage wearing his wife's nightgown and suffering from acute intestinal (child-laboresque) distress (*Eccl.*311-371). And upon her return home Praxagora excuses her absence with the story of helping a friend who went into labor during the night (*Eccl.*528-529).

It is on the feminization of Blepyrus and his mock-childbirth that Aristophanes again focuses his use of the Hippocratic gynecological recipes. The *Ecclesiazusae* concludes with the announcement of a feast (*Eccl.*1163-6). But added to this standard ending is the chorus' recommendation that Blepyrus take some porridge (*lekithos*) to eat. Previous interpretations have understood this scene as implying that the feast is being rapidly devoured and no food will remain for Blepyrus (Sommerstein 1984, 322-323). In the Hippocratic corpus, however, *lekithos* appears only in the gynecological texts. It is

prescribed as a therapy for women suffering from a variety of gastrointestinal ailments (*Mul.*52.1-13, 109.25-29, 192.1-4), and the recommendation of porridge appears to be a specific remedy for Blepyrus' previous difficulties during his first appearance in the comedy.

On one level the chorus' recommendation of a food product associated with women to an already emasculated man punctuates the theme of gender inversion. Furthermore, Aristophanes' use of gynecological recipes situates the discourse of the comedy's inversion themes (both gender and political) within the bodily and sustentative experiences that typically characterize Athenian Old Comedy (cf. Henderson 1991, Wilkins 2000). This paper concludes by suggesting that in his use of gynecological recipes and the motif of childbirth in the *Ecclesiazusae* Aristophanes also engages with treatments of the female reproductive experience in other literary genres of 5th and 4th centuries (e.g., Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Plato's *Symposium*).

Select Bibliography

Hanson, Ann Ellis. 1991. "Conception, Gestation, and the Origin of the Female Nature in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*." *Helios* 17:31-71.

—. 1998. "Talking Recipes in the Gynaecological Texts of the *Hippocratic Corpus*" in *Parchments of Gender*, ed. Maria Wyke, 71-94. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Henderson, J. 1991. *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*. Second Edition. New Haven: Yale University Press.

King, Helen. 1995. "Food and Blood in Hippocratic Gynaecology" in *Food in Antiquity*, eds. John Wilkins, David Harvey and Mike Dobson, 351-358. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Miller, Harold W. 1945. "Aristophanes and Medical Language." *TAPA* 76:74-84.

Sommerstein, Alan. 1984. "Aristophanes and the Demon Poverty." *CQ* 34.2:314-333.

—, ed. and trans. 2007 (1998). *Aristophanes: Ecclesiazusae*. Oxford: Aris & Phillips.

Wilkins, John. 2000. *The Boastful Chef: The Discourse of Food in Ancient Comedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.