

Reading Between the Lions: *Thesmophoriazusae* 514-516

In Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, the kinsman of Euripides relates numerous colorful examples of inappropriate female behaviour, including among them the story of a feigned birth and the purchase of a suppositious child, smuggled into the household. After its acquisition, the would-be midwife runs out of the 'delivery room' and proudly announces to the oblivious husband, "a lion, a lion is born for you!" (514), ostensibly, at least, congratulating the man and promising a puissant offspring. Scholars consistently cite the comic passage in the debate on the uncertain symbolism of the lion in the Herodotean version of Pericles' birth (6.131), but it has been underappreciated in the discussion, traditionally considered merely ironic or dismissed as little more than parody of Herodotus (e.g. Dyson 1929, Harvey 1966, McNellen 1997; cf. Taillardat 1965, Austin and Olson 2004, Corbel-Morana 2012). While the lines are superficially a compliment, I argue that through context and language the midwife implies a secondary meaning in her appellation, glibly alluding to the well-known fable of the 'lion in the household', a creature initially innocent but ultimately vicious and most familiar to modern readers from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (717ff.). By means of the lion portent and comedic equivocation Aristophanes thus has the old woman hint toward the eventual household upheaval and ruin that a suppositious child brings. The humour of the text is darker than has been previously appreciated, uniting societal concerns of illegitimacy with the inevitable devastation induced by the fabular lion. After examining passages regarding the rearing of lions in domesticated settings, I argue that Aristophanes recognizes and uses the same original fable as Aeschylus (though he does not refer specifically to the tragic lines here), one evidently so memorable that it became practically proverbial; to mention a 'lion in the house' was to evoke a harbinger of destruction and internal ruin (e.g. Ar. *Frogs* 1431-2 and Pl. *Gorg.* 483e-484a). I also compare tales of the

miraculous birth of lions, and lions *qua* human children, and suggest that they likewise derive, ultimately, from the same original fable (e.g. Herodotus' oracle for the tyrant Cypselus (5.92β) and the oracle for the Paphlagonian in *Knights* (1037ff.).

On the basis of references to suppositious children in contemporary literature, I then propose that the context surrounding the birth portent in *Thesmophoriazusae* would induce the theatre audience to recall negative leonine imagery. Like the lion cub, these suppositious children were given the benefits of a civilized life and reared in the household as if it were their proper domain, but they were, in truth, slaves, not citizens (cf. Dem. 21.149, Eur. *Alc.* 636-9, Telecleides fr. 44). In time the youths demonstrate their true genealogical heritage, and upon realizing an innately slavish *phusis* they become a bane to the family: disruptive to rightful inheritance patterns (Isaeus 6.22-26), destructive to familial wealth (Dem. 9.31; Plaut. *Truc. passim*), and even a source of violence or death within the household (Herod. 1.137; Pl. *Rep.* 537e-538c). The equation of lion cub and suppositious child would resonate deeply for the Athenian audience and create a powerful image of internal household collapse, solidifying the critical message that is implicit in the other, briefer references to such children in the play (339-40; 407-8; 564-5). The promise here of a leonine son is by no means simple congratulations, therefore, nor any cause for celebration, but a subtle and ominous foretelling of imminent woe.

Works Cited

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