Choosing Sides: Expression & Suppression of the Senses in the *Thesmophoriazusae*

The beginning of the *Thesmophoriazusae*, while on the one hand is a commonly attested joke among scholars today, is lacking from our academic discourse. The convoluted nature of this intricate witticism is also overlooked by many translators, who fail to monopolize on the abundant puns within the script.

**RELATIVE**

πρὶν τὸν σπλήνα κομιδῇ μ᾽ ἐκβάλεῖν,
παρὰ σοῦ πυφέσθαι ποῖ μ᾽ ἄγεις οὐριπίδη;  
Before I throw up my spleen completely, O Euripides,

**EURIPIDES**

ἀλλ᾽ οὐκ ἀκούειν δεῖ σε πάνθ᾽ ὅσ᾽ αὐτίκα ὀψεῖ παρεστώς.  
But it is not necessary to hear all the things which immediately you will see by being here?

**RELATIVE**

πῶς λέγεις; αὖθις φράσον.  
What did you say? Repeat it.

**EURIPIDES**

οὐχ ἅ γ᾽ ἂν μέλλῃς ὁρᾶν.
No, truly! What you are going to see.

Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 3-7

(All translations are my own.)

I insert “as I listen,” “while I am looking,” and so on, to indicate the difference in the Greek that the verbs of learning express. πυνθάνομαι - to learn, to hear tell of; οἶδα - to know, learn with your eyes; μανθάνω - learn by both hearing and seeing.

Anyone who has read the *Thesmophoriazusae* will immediately recall this seeing and hearing debate which, like any prologue is fundamentally programmatic. By expressing these senses at the very beginning of the play, Aristophanes is alerting the audience. As Clements succinctly puts it, “when theatre turns inward to theorize itself explicitly [metatheater]…it does so using the lens of one particular philosophical framework.” (Clements 2014, I) However, this vision does not appear to be unique. A fragment of Cratinus reflects on similar themes found at the beginning of the *Thesmophoriazusae*:

“ἀκοῦε, σίγα, πρόσεχε τὸν νοῦν, δεῦρ’ ὅρα.

“Listen, be quiet, focus [with your eyes] your mind, look here.”

Cratin. Fr. 315 KA

This type of metapoetry has a layering effect. On the surface layer, it announces the arrival of Agathon, but also hints at the transition of Relative into a woman. Underneath this is a comment on the theatrical convention of his time: male actors becoming female characters. Within this veiled critique, Aristophanes, as many scholars have noticed, is setting up his competition against tragedy with, in his view, the vastly superior genre of comedy. However, there is a focus on not only an expression of the senses, but also a clear suppression of senses.
RELATIVE
οὐδ᾽ ἂρ᾽ ὀρᾶν δεῖ μ᾽;
And it’s not necessary to see....

EURIPIDES
οὐχ ᾧ γ᾽ ἂν ἀκούειν δέῃ.
No, truly! What you need to hear.

RELATIVE
πῶς μοι παραίνεις; δεξιῶς μέντοι λέγεις.
What are you telling me? You certainly speak cleverly.

EURIPIDES
οὐ φής σὺ χρῆναι μ᾽ οὔτ᾽ ἀκούειν οὔθ᾽ ὁρᾶν;
You say that is is not necessary to neither hear nor see?

EURIPIDES
χωρὶς γὰρ αὐτοῖν ἑκατέρου 'στὶν ἡ φύσις.
For different, each one from the other, is the nature of these.

RELATIVE
τοῦ μὴτ´ ἀκούειν μὴθ´ ὁρᾶν;
Of not hearing and not seeing?

EURIPIDES
εὖ ἴσθ᾽ ὅτι.
Know it well [with your eyes], that’s it.
RELATIVE

διὰ τὴν χοάνην οὖν μὴ τ´ ἀκούω μήθ´ ὁρῶ;
νῇ τὸν Δ´ ἢδομαί γε τούτι προσμαθὼν.
oἰόν γέ που 'στιν αἱ σοφαὶ ξυνουσίαι.

And because of this funnel I don’t need to hear nor see;
By Zeus! I am pleased to learn it [through my senses].
Oh how [great it is] to have wise company!

EURIPIDES

πόλλ´ ἂν μάθοις τοιαῦτα παρ´ ἐμοὺ.

Many things such as this you would learn [with sight and sound] by my side.

Aristophanes, Thesmophoriazusae, 7-10, 19-21.

The continual repetition of varying forms of οὐ and μὴ are clear reflections on the need of the audience to reject/suppress their senses in order to enjoy fully the dramatic experience. The rest of the play demonstrates this. By laying ‘bare’ the process by which male actors become female characters, Aristophanes gives the audience a glimpse under the tunic.