

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 σπλῆνα κομιδῆ μ' ἐκβαλεῖν,

παρὰ σοῦ πυφέσθαι ποῖ μ' ἄγεις ὠρίπιδη;

Before I throw up my spleen completely, O Euripides,

teach me [as I listen] where you lead me!

EURIPIDES

ἀλλ' οὐκ ἀκούειν δεῖ σε πάνθ' ὅσ' αὐτίκα

ᾔψει παρεστώς.

But it is not necessary to hear all the things

which immediately you will see by being here?

RELATIVE

πῶς λέγεις; αὐθις φράσον.

οὐ δεῖ μ' ἀκούειν;

What did you say? Repeat it.

It is not necessary for me to hear....

EURIPIDES

οὐχ ἅ γ' ἄν μέλλης 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*:

“ἄκουε, σίγα, πρόσεχε τὸν νοῦν, δεῦρ’ ὄρα.

“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' ἄρ' ὄρᾶν δεῖ μ' ;

And it's not necessary to see....

EURIPIDES

οὐχ ἄ γ' ἂν ἀκούειν δέη.

No, truly! What you need to hear.

RELATIVE

πῶς μοι παραινεῖς; δεξιῶς μέντοι λέγεις.

οὐ φῆς σὺ χρῆναί μ' οὔτ' ἀκούειν οὔθ' ὄρᾶν;

What are you telling me? You certainly speak cleverly.

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 μήτ' ἀκούειν μήθ' ὄρᾶν;

Of not hearing and not seeing?

EURIPIDES

εἶ ἴσθ' ὅτι.

Know it well [with your eyes], that's it.

RELATIVE

διὰ τὴν χοάνην οὐδὲ μήτ' ἀκούω μήθ' ὄρω;

νὴ τὸν Δί' ἤδομαι γε τοῦτι προσμαθῶν.

οἷόν γέ που 'στὶν αἰ 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' ἐμοῦ.

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

Aristophanes, *Theesmophoriazusae*, 7-10, 19-21.

The continual repetition of varying forms of οὐ and μή 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.