

Trinity College

Trinity College Digital Repository

The Trinity Papers (2011 - present)

Trinity Publications (Newspapers, Yearbooks,
Catalogs, etc.)

2017

Men, Look to the Oikos: Women as Invaders of Public Space in Aristophanes

Joy Kim

Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/trinitypapers>



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kim, Joy, "Men, Look to the Oikos: Women as Invaders of Public Space in Aristophanes". *The Trinity Papers (2011 - present) (2017)*.

Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford, CT. <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/trinitypapers/60>

Joy Kim

Dr. Shane Ewegen

Greek Comedy: Aristophanes

Men, Look to the *Oikos*: Women as Invaders of Public Space in Aristophanes

In Old Attic Comedy, also known as Aristophanic comedy, women are at the center of three plays in which they practically invade the male-dominated political realm of Athens. While in tragedy, women are often portrayed as “wild” and threatening, these three Aristophanic plays depict women’s bringing the solution to the *polis*’ (πόλις) problems.¹ Throughout *Lysistrata*, *Women at Thesmophoria*, and *Assemblywomen*, boundaries between private and public realms are blurred, whether in terms of gender roles or in terms of the distinction between the *oikos* (house) and the *polis* (city). Women take on masculine roles of civic involvement and enter into public spaces unaccompanied by men, sometimes with the goal of using their experience in the domestic sphere to solve political problems. But even though Henderson states that male characters in Aristophanes’ plays are defeated by women for their own good, Aristophanes is not consistent when it comes to women’s saving the *polis*. Though in *Lysistrata*, women effectively establish peace after two decades of war, their leader is called the “manliest of all men.” The success of the female cause is short-lived in *Women at Thesmophoria*, as Euripides escapes his punishment by using a female prostitute. And in *Assemblywomen*, a group of women seek to reestablish order in the *polis*, but instead cause more chaos. Beyond specific details of plot that do not really empower women, much of Aristophanic comedy derives its humor from making fun of women. Ancient Greek beliefs that women were sexually voracious alcoholics are certainly not absent from these three plays. We would be remiss if we called Aristophanes a proto-feminist.

Women in these three plays are simultaneously agents of change and the projections of stereotypes, the deliverers of peace and the instigators of chaos, the commanders of both the *polis* and the *oikos*. I argue in this paper that we can reconcile these contradictory portrayals of women by looking at the way Aristophanes combines the public and private domains to make political statements. Using women as a literary device, Aristophanes criticizes male politicians for wasting Athens' funds, dragging them through war, and abusing democracy. He brings women into the public sphere so that men might look at political life through the lens of the *oikos*, a world with which they are less familiar. Though greater freedom for women is not Aristophanes' main vendetta, he acknowledges and utilizes women's collective experiences to call for men to improve everyone's lives in the *polis*. Through putting women in positions of governance in these three plays, Aristophanes imposes the *oikos* onto the *polis* to call on male politicians and military leaders to be more practical and moderate.

Taking Control of Public Space

Prior to Athens' radical democracy in the 5th century B.C.E., noble families led the *polis*, and thus there was less of a division between the private and public spheres. With the ability of all citizen men older than 18 to participate in democracy, civic space became increasingly masculine as more men had access to politics.ⁱⁱ Several factors of Athenian culture demonstrate how women were expected to be more private and to avoid attention in the public sphere. Firstly, it was improper for unmarried girls to be seen out in public, which is why older women have a more active role in Aristophanes' plays.ⁱⁱⁱ Women could not be called their personal names outside of their families; in public, they were addressed as being someone's wife or daughter.^{iv} Secondly, these ideals of privacy are also seen in the types of occupations that were considered proper for women. Xenophon discusses how women are not "suited" for the public sphere, while men should

not be in the house.^v Not only were women barred from the political world, but it was also preferred that they work at home instead of in public spaces like the *agora*, or marketplace.^{vi} And lastly, Solon initiated legislation that encapsulated what Athenian men feared about women in public. According to Plutarch, Solon “imposed a law on the public appearances of women” during festivals in order to “limit the disorderly and the licentious.”^{vii}

All of these insights about the social situation of 5th century Athens make significant any instances wherein women control public spaces in Aristophanes’ plays. Women could freely interact with each other in public in the plays. For example, women spoke to each other around fountains in *Lysistrata*.^{viii} The three plays discussed here are also all set in public spaces designed for governance, which was intended for only men in Athenian society. Not only do women occupy these spaces, but they also step into the political roles that accompany these spaces. They seize the public funds, try to execute a poet who reveals their infidelity, and dress up as men to take over the assembly. These acts in themselves were not socially acceptable in Athens at this time, but seem even more radical considering how little public space was meant for women. The Acropolis and the *ekklesia* (assembly) were by no means spheres of women’s influence. But in *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen*, the women’s *oikos* merges with the public sphere.

Women enter the public sphere in these plays mainly by imposing the domestic sphere onto public space. Firstly, women use sex, a crucial aspect of their role in society, to take over the public realm. One of their critical roles in society is to give and receive sexual gratification, and it is their eroticism that allows them to gain political power in *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen*.^{ix} Beyond sexual acts, however, women’s management of households is brought into the public arena. They argue in both *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen* that their handling of finances in the *oikos* equips them to do the same for the *polis*. But in all three plays, men hinder women from fulfilling their

domestic duties. They first do this by dragging the polis through war for years. Society cannot survive without women, because as they care for their families, they raise worthy male citizens who will look after the *polis*.

But for men, defending the *polis* often meant entering into war, which in turn diminished the wellbeing of the family as men die in battle.^x In times of war, women's societal role of preserving the family for the sake of the polis seems wasted, for men kill each other in the name of defending the *polis*. The Athenian military general Pericles states in his funeral oration that the women who have lost male family members to war should "remain unseen and unheard."^{xi} Aristophanes acknowledges the suffering that all citizens, particularly women, have experienced as a result of hasty and selfish political and military decision. He also brings together the worlds of *oikos* and *polis*, for looking at them both is necessary to understand how to work towards the best interest of the *polis*.

Women as a Literary Device to Criticize Men

Although Aristophanes' inserting female characters into political roles and spaces seems to be socially radical and liberating, there is not much evidence to suggest that women's rights were the crux of his vendetta. Nor does Aristophanes seem overly sympathetic towards women. It is precisely their lack of power and their reputation for being overly sexual and insensible that Aristophanes uses for political satire. O'Higgins argues that Aristophanes does not highlight individuals much as the collective group of women in order to direct political criticism towards men. Additionally, women's lack of independence made it easier for Aristophanes to lump them into a singular whole.^{xiii} This is plausible because in Athenian society, women further established solidarity, for Solon's legislation increasingly privatized their lives. Women of various social classes often worked together in the *oikos*, and in this setting Athenian women as a whole created

bonds that are seen in Aristophanes' plays.^{xiii} Even though class distinctions existed, the extent of Athenian women's public lives was limited to their interactions with other women.

There is also textual evidence to support the idea that Aristophanes uses the collective body of Athenian women as a literary device. Whenever an individual woman such as Lysistrata or Praxagora leads others to political victory, they are highlighted as exceptional because of their ability to speak and carry themselves like a male politician. Aristophanes does not suggest, however, that women should suddenly begin behaving like men in order to have more freedom. Nor does Aristophanes use women as a literary device to criticize women or imply that women should improve themselves. His use of women as a literary device rather suggests that Aristophanes preserves many stereotypes about women in order to not detract from his greater point, which was to criticize male politicians. Women are not the object of Aristophanes' political message; they are simply a literary device used to convey that message to men.

Because Aristophanes was prohibited from directly accusing political leaders after 411 B.C.E., he used women to channel criticisms towards the city's leaders.^{xiv} It is unclear whether this had positive or negative implications for women. On the one hand, it can seem degrading for women that Aristophanes uses them as a comedic element to capture men's attentions. He intended to "shame the men in the audience into accepting his political advice and criticisms."^{xv} Henderson also suggests that Aristophanes uses women to soften the blow of his insults towards politicians. He said, "By using women as his heroic voices, Aristophanes could admonish and advise the Athenians from a nonpartisan direction (the private world), and in case the spectators should be offended they would have to admit that it was only a woman talking."^{xvi}

Although it is possible that Aristophanes did not think much of women, and that his plays did not liberate them at all, it is still significant that women were used as a literary device in the

first place considering the cultural context. Henderson posits that women were not merely “mouthpieces” for Aristophanes’ criticisms towards Athenian men; women in *Lysistrata*, for example, portrayed genuine concerns among women about the state of their city as they saw their sons and husbands dying to war.^{xvii} Aristophanes highlighted relevant issues regarding women’s place in society. His treatment of women is indicative of their societal status. They had the vital role of birthing the city’s leaders, fostering democratic ideals in the home, and pleasing their husbands, yet they were barred from the public arena. Women’s importance was more implicit than explicit in society. O’Higgins states, “Women could be both present and not present in a public situation...their voices could be audible while not officially on a public agenda.”^{xviii} The ways in which Aristophanes blends the private and public spheres and admonishes Athenian men through women in *Lysistrata*, *Women at Thesmophoria*, and *Assemblywomen* will be discussed individually.

Domestic Peace for the Polis in Lysistrata

Produced in 411 B.C.E., *Lysistrata* was performed to an audience that had been suffering through the Peloponnesian War for 20 years. “Comedy’s greatest years were during the Peloponnesian War,” according to O’Higgins.^{xix} Perhaps this was so because Aristophanes wrote *Lysistrata* and other plays intending to comment on the state of Athens at that time. Just as Athenian citizens were growing weary from war, the characters in *Lysistrata* were also eager to see the war end. Protagonist Lysistrata, whose name in Greek means “disarmer of armies,” offers a solution: the younger women will participate in a sex strike, while the older women will seize the Acropolis to prevent men from accessing the city’s funds. Lysistrata believes that women’s ability to run a household will enable them to run the city more effectively than men have during the tumultuous war.^{xx} For example, women would be prudent with money and would promote

peace, which men have failed to do for decades. Women also have self-interest in the war's end, for they are losing husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers. They protest the war that has wasted the "taxes" women have paid to the city by birthing sons.^{xxi} Their domain of the *oikos* is crumbling as a result of the war, and Lysistrata seeks to bring it to an end more effectively than any man had attempted to do.

Of course, the men in the play doubt the women's abilities. Fearing that giving into women's demands even a little will lead to disaster, the Men's Leader calls for locking the women in wooden stocks.^{xxii} Until the end, men's negative stereotypes against women—that they are incapable of rule, are alcoholics, and are wildly sexual beings—are evidenced. The Men's Leader calls women "enemies of all the gods and of Euripides."^{xxiii} The Magistrate condemns even the idea of being bested by women.^{xxiv} Such views of women surely existed in the audience, for it was preposterous to even imagine that women would be capable of such a demonstration, let alone control foreign policy. Aristophanes knew that a plot like this would garner much attention and laughter from his audience because of its utter ridiculousness.

As discussed earlier, these three plays are riddled with imagery of public space being transformed into the *oikos*. Lysistrata's plan brings together the private and public spheres in terms of both gender roles and physical space. Foley calls the women's attempts at making peace "a process of domestication" of the public sphere.^{xxv} The *oikos* represents the best that the *polis* could be, and thus a woman's role and world are depicted as being better than those of a man. Lysistrata says the *polis* does not need war to survive, and that women would transform the *polis* into a family if they took charge.^{xxvi} She knows that women's provision of private life is necessary for men's survival.^{xxvii} Though the Acropolis could be interpreted as a feminine space dedicated to goddess Athena, the fact that it is the most prominent and central public space in Athens means that it is

more of a man's realm than a woman's. In fact, the men even call it *their* Acropolis after learning the women have captured it.^{xxviii} The image of women overtaking such a space, cultivating a plan to end war, and managing public funds is radical. After her protest has begun, Lysistrata tells the magistrate that she demands for men in the future to enter the Acropolis unarmed.^{xxix} Athens, in her view, would be more peaceful if the ideals of the *oikos* were applied to the *agora*. When Kinesias tries to have sex with Myrrhine in the overtaken Acropolis, she transforms it into a bedroom, bringing pillows and blankets into the space.^{xxx} Again and again, Aristophanes creates an image of an Acropolis, both in the present and the hopeful future, that becomes a more domesticized space.

Even more radical is that the plan turns out to be successful, and peace is finally achieved after the failed efforts of men for 20 years. The women's success seems to outweigh the negative stereotypes thrown at them throughout the play, and contradicts the apparent ridiculousness with which the audience would have viewed the play. But while the efforts of a collective group of women allow for peace to occur, Lysistrata is distinct from her comrades, being referred to as "the manliest of men."^{xxxi} In order to know Aristophanes' intentions in making his hero a female, we must ask whether he even considered her a typical woman. Calling Lysistrata the manliest of men downplays her womanness, and implies that it was not her female qualities that enabled her to save the *polis*. When Lysistrata shares her plan with the women of all warring states, Kalonike says, "But what can mere *women* do that's intelligent or noble?"^{xxxii} The women themselves doubt that Lysistrata's plan will be effective, or that it will be worth the sacrifice of giving up sex, which furthers the stereotype that women are sexually insatiable. Lysistrata is the only young woman that is not portrayed as overly sexual and lacking in self control, demonstrating that women were not portrayed to be entirely noble in Aristophanic texts. Some of the women try to escape the Acropolis

to go have sex with their husbands, and Lysistrata must fight continuously for the women to stay with their mission.^{xxxiii} It is Lysistrata alone that is invited into the meeting with the magistrates, and it is Lysistrata who gropes Lampito and treats her body parts as goods that she will use for her own personal gain.^{xxxiv}

Because the hero of this play is not really a typical woman, it makes more sense to think of it as a charge for men to look inward. If they valued the things of the home more, they could avoid war. Instead of bringing men into the home, Aristophanes brings women into the public sphere. He uses the collective body of women to draw men's attention to peace. The women's demands for peace and the necessity of domestic life (including sex) trumps desires for war. This is seen in the play when men try to burn down the Acropolis, but the old women and their pursuit of peace squelch the fire with water.

Women at Thesmophoria – “If We’re That Bad...”

Women at Thesmophoria was produced a few months after *Lysistrata*.^{xxxv} The two plays are similar in that women come into a public space and collectively seek to address a complaint against men. In Greece, the Thesmophoria was goddess Demeter's most popular festival—at least 30 cities in Greece celebrated it. Women gathered to commemorate the kidnapping of Persephone and men were not allowed to attend. Some Greek cities constructed huts; in Athens, buildings called Thesmophoria were built. There is debate over whether a city-wide celebration occurred on the Pnyx as Aristophanes conveys in the play, or local demes (suburbs) had their own individual celebrations. The Pnyx was a hill in central Athens where the most prominent buildings and public spaces were erect. More epigraphic literary evidence exists to support the deme-level theory.^{xxxvi} Henderson, on the other hand, suggests that the gathering indeed occurred at the Pnyx as Aristophanes writes in the play, citing an inscription in 122 B.C.E. that notes an occasion when

the Athenian assembly met in the theater instead of the Pnyx.^{xxxvii} Whether or not the festival truly occurred at the Pnyx, Aristophanes sets up the play so that women are unaccompanied by men in a space designed specifically for male political activity. They gathered and formed assemblies and governing structures that emulated that of men. In addition, law courts and council meetings were put on pause.

In Athenian society, the Thesmophoria significantly changed normative social structure. This festival represented a temporary disruption of gender norms, but it was not really a radical act of rebellion because men had to financially support the festival. The Thesmophoria was also about fertility, but not limited to biological reproduction. It involved “the handing down of critical and empowering gynecological knowledge from older to younger women.”^{xxxviii} Such traditions were vital to women’s understanding their vital roles in society. Considering these aspects of the festival, it seems that the Thesmophoria could be an opportunity for women to collectively feel empowered and at least temporarily be more equal to men. Aristophanes’ choosing the Thesmophoria as the setting of this play further solidifies the idea that he used collective bodies of women to make political statements to men.

But even though the Thesmophoria could be seen as an empowering experience for women, Aristophanes does not treat this gathering as a noble one in his play. Neither politics nor war are mentioned, but rather women’s annoyance with Euripides’ revealing the secrets of their sexual licentiousness. The women are focused entirely on private and somewhat selfish concerns, voting to punish Euripides for slandering them in his tragedies.^{xxxix} Though it was socially acceptable in Athens for women to occupy public space during this festival without the company of men, Aristophanes depicts the festival as a setting for indecency. He treats the women as if they themselves were utilizing public space not for piety or love of the *polis*, but rather to cover up their

own transgressions. In reality, no man knew what really occurred at the festival, and it was a crime to invade the women's privacy.^{xl} Thus, scenes of the festival depicted in the play are entirely speculated. Aristophanes appropriates the sacred tradition of the Thesmophoria to create comedy and political commentary. This is not to say that he agreed with men in their distrust of women, but the festival is portrayed in a way that it was not completely socially acceptable. It was a normal tradition ingrained into Athenian culture, but men seem to be very curious and suspicious about what women do at the Thesmophoria. Again, we see men speculating about what women are doing in civic spaces.

The crossing of gender boundaries is also seen in *Women at Thesmophoria*, but unlike in *Lysistrata*, both men and women cross gender boundaries here. Euripides tries to recruit Agathon to dress as a woman and sneak into the festival, for he is "clean-shaven" and "sounds like a woman."^{xli} The Kinsman takes the ridicule further, crudely mocking Agathon for having taking a role of submission in sexual relations with another man.^{xlii} Homosexuality was not considered shameful in Athenian society, but if one was the submissive role in a homosexual relationship, he was considered weak and feminine. Thus, depicting men trying to be women is worthy of ridicule in this cultural context. A comedic scene ensues as the Kinsman agrees to Euripides' plan when Agathon refuses, and the graphic plucking and singeing of body hairs is meant to humor the audience.^{xliii} Thus, men cross gender boundaries by both dressing as women and infiltrating a sacred space socially designated for women at the festival.

A single woman does not rise to leadership in *Women at Thesmophoria*, as we saw in *Lysistrata* and we will see in *Assemblywomen*, but we get a glimpse of women acting as men. For example, Mika "clears her throat just as the politicians do" and explains why the women must punish Euripides.^{xliv} The body of women celebrating the festival functions as a male assembly, and

individuals within that body must imitate male politicians in their temporary gender role reversal. Furthermore, women's role in the household is also discussed. Euripides' portrayal of women prohibits them from managing their own households freely and doing anything they used to do, for they are constantly suspected of infidelity.^{xlv} The women do not say here that anything Euripides has said is true. It is not merely slander that motivates the women to punish Euripides. They cannot fulfill their societal duties as housewives because they constantly are interrupted by their suspecting husbands. Here, Aristophanes seems more sympathetic to women, as it becomes clear that men's accusations of them are rather unfounded and ridiculous.

The Chorus-Leader says in the parabasis, "But really, if we're that bad, why do you marry us? If we're really so bad, why do you forbid us to leave the house or even get caught peeking out the window? Why do you want to keep a careful eye on something so bad?"^{xlvi} Because the parabasis is the portion of the play in which Aristophanes most directly speaks to his audience, it is significant that Aristophanes uses this opportunity to criticize Athenian men through the voice of the female Chorus-Leader (although this Chorus-Leader would obviously have been played by a man). He sheds light on the reality of Athenian society at that time. While male politicians are at fault for stealing public funds and dragging Athens through war, women are blamed for everything, though they have the indispensable role of maintaining peace in households. The Chorus-Leader cites a list of military leaders and politicians who have caused more damage than women: Charminos, Kleophon, Aristomache, and others.^{xlvii} Perhaps Aristophanes uses the setting of the Thesmophoria and the voice of the women to charge male politicians of ruining the city. Aristophanes' using women as a literary device to criticize men of political misconduct will be discussed further later. Nevertheless, not all negative stereotypes about women are rejected. The Kinsman, disguised as a woman, interjects with a slew of accusations that he says are true about

their gender.^{xlviii} Mika feeds into men's belief that women are alcoholics by nursing a "baby" that is really a wineskin.^{xlix} The ending of the play also waters down any hopes that Aristophanes writes the play primarily to embolden women. Women's empowerment is very fleeting, as Euripides ends up tricking the policeman with Elaphion, a prostitute.¹ Euripides uses a woman to betray women yet again.

Despite the lack of discussion about war and politics in *Women at Thesmophoria*, this play still seems to call on men in the audience to look into the realm of the *oikos*. Women do not win in this play, but they do not really lose either. Euripides and the Kinsman both had to humiliate themselves greatly to avoid being punished, crossing gender boundaries of dress and proper behavior. The societal state essentially returns to normal by the end of the play. Thus, Aristophanes' agenda could not have been to suggest greater independence for women, as he chose a setting in which women's greater freedoms are not permanent. Here, the message seems to lie in the parabasis. When looking at the domestic domain, men are obsessed with finding an accusation against their wives. But they do not realize the corruption that exists in their own world. Aristophanes calls on men to first look at "the other side," so to speak, and see the realities of their households with more clarity. Once that is done, they can hopefully see more clearly the much more dismal realities of their own public domain. As Henderson states, "the play satirizes not so much women as male attempts to understand them."^{li}

Democracy's Failures in Assemblywomen

As seen in *Lysistrata*, *Assemblywomen* is a return to women's attempts to appropriate the political sphere and transform it into the *oikos*. Probably produced in 391 B.C.E., *Assemblywomen* was performed 20 years after *Lysistrata* and *Women at Thesmophoria*. During those two decades, Athens had experienced massive upheaval and political instability. The *polis* lost the

Peloponnesian War, saw the replacement of democracy with oligarchy and later tyranny, and underwent a counterrevolution to restore democracy.^{lii} Structures of democracy also saw change, as men started getting paid for attending assembly meetings. Perhaps Aristophanes was criticizing the obsession with assembly participation that occurred as a result of the higher pay. Praxagora cites the greed and use of public funds for private pleasure that has corrupted the city in her address to the assembly.^{liii} This play can be interpreted as a response to the many political events that caused fear and uncertainty throughout Athens. In this historical context, Praxagora and the other women take matters into their own hands and rule the city themselves. There was also philosophical debate in Athens during this time about the potential for women to have greater rights.^{liv} Aristophanes brings together in this play the question about women's place in society and the chaos caused by male politicians in Athens.

As in *Women at Thesmophoria*, gender boundaries are crossed, but this time, women dress up as men to sneak into the assembly. Women again take over a civic space in the male political realm for their own mission, like the women in *Lysistrata* seized the Acropolis. A single woman, Praxagora, also emerges as a leader in *Assemblywomen*, but she does not have to force the other women to join her cause as Lysistrata did. Praxagora is chosen to speak at the assembly simply because she is the only one capable, which is a result of learning to emulate politicians when she lived on the Pnyx as a refugee.^{lv} In all three of the plays discussed in this paper, women become skilled leaders because they imitate the way male politicians speak. Furthermore, Lysistrata and Praxagora both had to make excuses for being good leaders in the public sphere, which makes them seem exceptional.^{lvi} Aristophanes conveys the message that not any woman can easily become a political leader, and that this can only be achieved even in the world of fantasy by trying to be like a man.

As in *Lysistrata*, the public and domestic spheres intersect. Women sneak into the assembly meeting because they believe their abilities as housewives will save the city's ills. As mothers, they value the preservation of life, and as practical managers of the *oikos*, they will not hastily vote for new ideas that almost destroyed Athens.^{lvii} Praxagora says that the assembly is "quick to vote on something, then they turn around and refuse to abide by it."^{lviii} Here, Aristophanes seems to criticize Athenian democracy. In Praxagora's plan, women maintain notions of managing a household while also abandoning their female ways in order to obtain political power. When the women dress as men and prepare to infiltrate the assembly, Praxagora prohibits the Second Woman from knitting during the assembly meeting, for only then can they "do something good for the *polis*."^{lix} Simultaneously, the women believe they can do good for the city precisely because of their experience as housewives. Praxagora and the other women are not concerned with money making, policy, legislation, or other political aspects of Athens. Their priorities are communism and fairness, which are ideals they would use in running a household.^{lx} They acquire control by emulating men, but impose what they know about the *oikos* onto the *polis*.

It can seem that Aristophanes presents a solution for the city's ills. But the events that transpire in *Assemblywomen* do not seem to suggest that women's rule will do much good for Athens. While women successfully negotiate peace in *Lysistrata*, chaos ensues as women execute their plan in *Assemblywomen*. Praxagora's effort to make everything in public life communal, as it would be within the privacy of the *oikos*, proves disastrous. Because women were more used to cooperating and sharing with each other, they bring these ideals from the domestic world into the political world. Casement describes Praxagora's "communist utopia" as "an extended domestic utopia."^{lxi} Her call for communal sex seems to be the most disruptive policy. The idea of older women being depicted as more respectable than younger women, as seen in *Lysistrata*, does not

exist in *Assemblywomen*. Old women fight over young men like Epigenes, thereby showing the failure of Praxagora's system of communal love.^{lxii}

Casement argues that women's increased freedom is "an exaggerated connecting thread" that carries a message about the inherent flaw of both democracy and communism. Aristophanes criticizes the idea of complete equality rather than promoting it. Because humans are selfish, they will not be satisfied with what merely sustains them.^{lxiii} *Assemblywomen* highlights the need for leaders to look beyond what people simply need. The fact that the assembly could be so easily convinced by a person who is good at public speaking to make such drastic political changes could also be Aristophanes' criticism of Athens' democratic system. Aristophanes does not desire the *demos* to have a greater say in the political process, for they are too easily influenced by persuasive public speakers.

In *Assemblywomen*, we also see a man acting in a domestic sphere. Whereas Kineas in *Lysistrata* failed to manage his household in his wife's absence, as evidenced by the unfed and unbathed child, the Neighbor in *Assemblywomen* joyfully fulfills both his domestic and civic duties. Responding to Praxagora's new law for all private possessions to become communal, the Neighbor cares for his utensils as if they are women preparing for a procession.^{lxiv} His love for the private also allows him to love the public.^{lxv} Unlike in the first two plays discussed, *Assemblywomen* has a character that truly balances love for the *oikos* and love for the *polis*. The Neighbor could be Aristophanes' example of who Athenian men should aspire to be. It was discussed earlier that the goals of the public sphere, to preserve the city, often destroy the private sphere through war. Perhaps *Assemblywomen* is meant to be the reversal of that phenomenon, transforming the public sphere into the private and abandoning the traditional aspects of public life.^{lxvi}

Women Above and Beyond the City

Aristophanes portrayed genuine “female discontent,” for “the comic poet’s role was to give humorous and reassuring expression to the social currents running beneath the surface of public discourse.”^{lxvii} He acknowledged the tangible concerns and suffering women experienced through decades of war and discord in Athens. But there is not enough evidence in his plays to suggest that he sought to better their social situation. *Lysistrata* only bargains with men because they see her as a man, and uses female sexuality to get what she wants. Though it can be empowering that women can exert much influence over men because of their sexuality and domesticity, it is also telling that the men listen to the women only when they are deprived sexually. The women at *Thesmophoria* are disappointed with Athens’ political state, but cannot even maximize their roles in the *oikos* because of the distrust Euripides has caused in husbands. By the end of the play, they are betrayed by Euripides, who uses a woman’s body to escape justice. And lastly in *Assemblywomen*, Praxagora’s reforms underscore the negative repercussions of unbridled female sexuality. At the end of the day, any woman’s success is entirely fantasy. These plays were performed at the Festival of Dionysia, a celebration of wine and sexuality, and itself a transformation of the public into private space.^{lxviii} So despite the persistent imagery of female ownership of the public realm, there is little to prove that Aristophanes is a proto-feminist or called for women to expand their political presence.

Rather, Aristophanes uses women as a literary device in trying to change men. Much of Athens’ dark times, caused by decades of war, political corruption, hasty upheavals in the political system, were the result of men’s mistakes. Aristophanes combines the realms of *oikos* and *polis* in these three plays, showing the shortcomings of politicians in only pursuing economic necessity. The experience of women, who take care of the household in the background of all these political

events, sheds new light and wisdom on how men can better rule Athens. By bringing women into the public sphere in his plays, Aristophanes calls on men to adopt some domestic ideals of pragmatism and peace when making political decisions. Aristophanes does not suggest that women should be taken out of their domain and replace men in politics. Women and their world are modified and manipulated by Aristophanes to show men how they should improve themselves.

Although Aristophanes does not call for drastic social transformations wherein women have more rights, nor does he dilute negative stereotypes about women, it is significant nonetheless that he chose women as the carrier of his message to men. Even in a society that did not want women to draw much attention in public, Aristophanes proves that they draw attention regardless. Women indeed had influence over men through their sexuality, their necessity in keeping a society alive through offspring, and their command and care of the oikos. That Aristophanes points to the woman's domain and suggests that men should emulate some of its aspects gives women much credit for their societal role. Aristophanes' portrayal of women in this way is described in the following: "The female, not tied to the city for fulfillment, is able to exist above and beyond the city."^{lxix} By modern standards, Aristophanes might even be deemed misogynistic. But considering the cultural and political context of his time, Aristophanes still conveyed to his audience the vital presence of women and the way their role in the oikos positively impacts the polis.

Bibliography

- Casement, William. "Political Theory in Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*." *Journal of Thought* 21, No. 4 (1986): 64-79.
- Cohen, David. "Seclusion, Separation, and the Status of Women in Classical Athens." *Greece and Rome* 36, No. 1 (1989): 3-15.
- Foley, Helene P. "The 'Female Intruder' Reconsidered: Women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae*." *Classical Philology* 77, No. 1 (1982): 1-21.
- Haley, Herman W. "The Social and Domestic Position of Women in Aristophanes." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 1 (1890): 159-186
- Henderson, Jeffrey. "Older Women in Attic Comedy." *American Philological Association* 117 (1987): 105-129.
- Henderson, Jeffrey. *Three Plays by Aristophanes Staging Women*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Hulton, A. O. "The Women on the Acropolis: A Note on the Structure of *Lysistrata*." *Greece and Rome* 19, No. 1 (1972): 32-36.
- O'Higgins, Laurie. *Women and Humor in Classical Greece*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Saxonhouse, Arlene W. "Men, Women, War and Politics: Family and Polis in Aristophanes and Euripides." *Political Theory* 8, No. 1 (1980): 65-81.
- Zeitlin, Froma I. "Travesties of Gender and Genre in Aristophanes' *Thermophoriazousae*." *Critical Inquiry* 8, No. 2 (1981): 301-327.

-
- ⁱ Jeffrey Henderson, *Three Plays by Aristophanes Staging Women* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 28.
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Herman W. Haley, "The Social and Domestic Position of Women in Aristophanes," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 1 (1890): 165.
- ^{iv} Henderson (2010), 21.
- ^v Xen. *Oec.* 7.3ff.
- ^{vi} Henderson (2010), 121.
- ^{vii} Plut. *Sol.* 21.4. Loeb Classical Library edition, 1914.
- ^{viii} Aristoph. *Lys.* 327, trans. Jeffrey Henderson.
- ^{ix} Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "Men, Women, War and Politics: Family and Polis in Aristophanes and Euripides," *Political Theory* 8, No. 1 (1980): 69.
- ^x *Ibid.*, 65-66.
- ^{xi} Thuc. 2.45.2.
- ^{xii} Laurie O'Higgins, *Women and Humor in Classical Greece* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 141-142.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 107.
- ^{xiv} Jeffrey Henderson "Older Women in Attic Comedy." *American Philological Association* 117 (1987): 128.
- ^{xv} Henderson (2010), 29.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 40.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 39.
- ^{xviii} O'Higgins, 162.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, 105.
- ^{xx} *Lys.* 471ff.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 589-590.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 671-679.
- ^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, 278-279.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, 431-432.
- ^{xxv} Helene P. Foley, "The 'Female Intruder' Reconsidered: Women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae*," *Classical Philology* 77, No. 1 (1982): 8.
- ^{xxvi} *Lys.* 497ff.
- ^{xxvii} Saxonhouse, 71.
- ^{xxviii} *Lys.* 263.
- ^{xxix} *Ibid.*, 557-564.
- ^{xxx} *Ibid.*, 919ff.
- ^{xxxi} *Ibid.*, 1129.
- ^{xxxii} *Ibid.*, 41.
- ^{xxxiii} *Ibid.*, 700ff.
- ^{xxxiv} *Ibid.*, 83ff.
- ^{xxxv} Henderson (2010), 94.
- ^{xxxvi} O'Higgins, 23.
- ^{xxxvii} Henderson (2010), 97.
- ^{xxxviii} O'Higgins, 21-25.
- ^{xxxix} Aristoph. *Thes.* 98ff., trans. Jeffrey Henderson.

-
- xl Class lecture, November 15, 2016.
xli *Thes.* 202-204.
xlii *Ibid.*, 214-215.
xliii *Ibid.*, 229ff.
xliv *Ibid.*, 401ff.
xlv *Ibid.*, 413ff.
xlvi *Ibid.*, 807-810.
xlvii *Ibid.*, 822ff.
xlviii *Ibid.*, 469ff.
xlix *Ibid.*, 703ff.
l *Ibid.*, 1234ff.
li Henderson (2010), 95.
lii *Ibid.*, 147.
liii Aristoph. *Ecc.* 197ff., trans. Jeffrey Henderson.
liv Henderson (2010), 148.
lv *Ecc.* 219ff.
lvi Haley, 186.
lvii *Ecc.* 586-587.
lviii *Ibid.*, 812-813.
lix *Ibid.*, 79-93.
lx Foley, 14.
lxi William Casement, "Political Theory in Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae.*" *Journal of Thought* 21, No. 4 (1986): 76.
lxii *Ecc.* 1073ff.
lxiii Casement, 65-70.
lxiv *Ecc.* 179.
lxv Saxonhouse, 78.
lxvi *Ibid.*, 68.
lxvii Henderson (1987), 128.
lxviii Saxonhouse, 71.
lxix *Ibid.*, 72.