

Wine, women, and Aristophanes

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The strong links between the wine-god, Dionysus, and Athenian drama are well known, and we are all familiar with the image of the long-haired god, festooned with grapes and vine-leaves, in company with his retinue of ecstatic bacchanals. In spite of the particular solemnity of the tragic content, the dramatic festivals of Athens were truly festive in spirit; and as the spectators were drawn into the fantasy worlds of the comedies, it is not surprising that throughout the extant works of the Attic comic poets are found recurring themes and images of drunkenness and wine.

With Aristophanes, though, wine took on a special role – that of the ultimate symbol of reconciliation. This is an understandable image, given the continuing presence of the Peloponnesian War, and the sad fact that, included among the various tactics employed in ancient warfare, was the deliberate and systematic destruction by the enemy of crops, including the grape-vine. As reflected in his "peace" plays, the restoration of harmony involves a return to the cultivation of the vine-crop and the subsequent consumption of wine. In the earlier works, while female allegorical figures such as Reconciliation, Harvest, and Festival may serve to re-unite the warring factions, it is predominantly the *men* who reap the fruits of the newly found peace and indulge in their favourite occupation – drinking.

In 411 B.C., Aristophanes produced a different kind of "peace" play, *Lysistrata*. Here, the heroine's novel establishment of a sex-strike, as a means to force the men to end the war, naturally gives great scope for obscenity, with both men and women being stereotyped as incurable lechers. At the same time, the poet takes the opportunity, in several scenes, to further the comic image of women as unduly fond of wine. In this, and the other so-called "women" plays (*Thesmophoriazousae* and *Ecclesiazusae*), several aspects of a female weakness for drink are satirised, with women drinking wine neat, or drinking in huge quantities and from enormous cups; stealing wine from household supplies; using religious festivals or other rituals as an excuse for getting drunk; and the recurring negative images or portrayals of 'bar-maids' and inebriated Hags. This aspect of Attic comedy is intriguing: whereas sources for the drinking habits of the Athenian *male* are manifold (in particular the scenes of symposia painted on drinking vessels), there is little evidence in realistic sources to confirm the popular image of women as tipplers.

Swearing and drinking

Various comic males use the swearing of oaths as an excuse to get drunk. 'Demosthenes', in *Knights*, for example, proclaims that the drinking of neat wine is the best method of making plans. When criticised by his fellow-slave, 'Nicias', he points out that all life's great things, such as inventions, decisions, business deals, victories, and lawsuits, are produced from drink. Similarly, an Athenian reveller appearing in *Lysistrata*, while boasting about his present state of drunkenness, suggests that the Athenians should always get drunk when going on diplomatic missions, in order to see things better than they really are. This notion is comically reflected and distorted in the prologue of *Ecclesiazusae*, where the women of Athens, under the leadership of Praxagora, are about to infiltrate the *ecclesia* (Assembly) disguised as men, and vote for women's rule. While secretly rehearsing for this, one woman assumes that because she has put on a wreath, she must necessarily drink some wine. When told to go and sit down, she delivers a tirade on the workings of the Assembly, claiming that the proof of the men's drunkenness there is in their absurd resolutions, their lengthy prayers (which require libations), and their continual arguments. Furthermore, when they become so drunk as to commit the crime of *paroinia*, which means acting in a drunk and disorderly manner, they must be forcibly removed by the authorities. In addition to appearing as a buffoon, she reveals herself as a typical comic woman, sulkily complaining of being parched. The subject is renewed by a second woman, who, in her trial speech, objects to the undesirable practice of installing water-tanks in pubs.

A further example of women impersonating men's boozy rituals is found in *Lysistrata*. Myrrhine makes a joke out of her love of wine by proclaiming that she would be willing to help stop the war even if it meant having to endure a *drink*. She later suggests that their oath should be sworn by placing a very large black cup on the ground, pouring some Thasian vine's 'blood' into it, and then swearing *not* to mix any water with it. This is the sort of oath appreciated by the other women in the scene, who cheer up at the enormous size of the cup and the wine-jar, and praise the colour and smell of the so-called blood. At the end of the oath, Lysistrata and her accomplices ask that, if they forsake their vows of sexual abstinence, the cup may prove to be filled with the worst of all evils – water. This comic idea of a punishment for women involving giving up wine is repeated in *Ecclesiazusae*, where the last to arrive at the secret women's meeting was to pay a forfeit of two and a half gallons of wine.

Women-only bar

Thesmophoriazusae, also produced in 411 B.C., also portrays women as being keen on drink. The sources for this annual, all-female festival of the Thesmophoria are rather limited, since the proceedings were strictly private, but it is assumed that the women spent much of their time engaged in worship. In the comic version, however, the lecherous women use this get-

together as an excuse to plot the death of their arch-enemy, Euripides, because his insistence on portraying adulterous heroines in his plays has alerted Athenian men to the illicit behaviour of their wives. Predictably, they are presented as being fond of drinking, and they use the religious festival as a means for putting this into action.

Unbeknown to the celebrants, an elderly relative of Euripides has stolen into the festival, disguised as an Athenian matron. His intention is to put in a good word for the playwright and rescue him from impending death. Word gets around that there is a man in their midst and – as the only stranger amongst them – he is instantly suspected and questioned closely by one of the female celebrants. When asked about the events of the previous festival, he proclaims, with great confidence (and a sigh of relief), that the first item on the agenda was drinking. The interrogator's reaction to his reply that their second act was then to drink some more, is one of horror – to think that someone has been divulging their feminine secrets! He slips up on the third question, however, by claiming that one of the ladies in the previous year then demanded a pot, as there was no toilet. Obviously, his answer should have been that they drank some more. They realise that he is an impostor, strip him, and tie him up.

The women and wine theme is extended in a hilarious scene in which one woman is thwarted in her attempts to cover up her fondness for wine. The baby she has been nursing is really a very full wine-skin. The old man seizes it and threatens to slaughter it, thereby cutting off her precious supply. In keeping with the literary and paratragic element of the play, this 'sacrifice' scene is a burlesque of Euripides' lost play, *Telephus*, in which the baby Orestes is snatched from the cradle and almost killed. It also provides Aristophanes with great scope for various 'women and wine' jokes concerning the gallonage (or age) of the baby, and the comic pretence of wine being blood, which has to be collected by the 'mother' in the sacrificial bowl. The 'Würzburg vase' has been interpreted as having a direct connection with *Thesmophoriazusae*: apart from the baby's booties, and the representation of the mirror on the wall (which is symbolic of a sanctuary), the figure on the vase is carrying *not* a sacrificial bowl but a crater – the type of vessel used for mixing wine and water.

Landladies and hags

Another theme related to drink is that of the bar and bar-keepers. Such establishments, their owners, and those who frequented them, were apparently held in bad repute in real life. The politician Hypereides claimed that the Areopagites debarred anyone who had frequented a wine-shop from being promoted to the Court of the Areopagus, since it was the type of place frequented by the most disreputable of men and women. The comic poets, however, portray gods such as Heracles, Dionysus, and Hermes as visiting such haunts. According to the male comic view, tavern-keepers are the only humans who find the deceitful and alcoholic race of womankind a *delight*. Conversely, one of the types most

hated by Athenian *women* is the bar-man or bar woman who either gives short measure or adulterates wine with water.

In the 'women' plays, the females themselves are naturally presented as having no objection to such types, and in fact welcome the wives of local inn-keepers to take part in their plots. Generally, though, judging from jokes in comedy, the worst insult a male can direct towards a female character is to accuse her of belonging to the wine trade. Such women had the reputation, along with sales-women and courtesans, of being loud and aggressive. This is why they are included among Lysistrata's troops, and why comic heroes – when confronted by horrific female figures such as Poverty – believe that they are being persecuted by bar-maids. Such an image is brought vividly to life in the caricatures of the two frightening Landladies from *Frogs*.

The Hag (another favourite Aristophanic stereotype) is often presented as a lecherous crone so soaked in wine that she both resembles and smells of dregs. Curiously, though, this particular caricature – although appearing as vicious (that is, with vices which were not tolerated by Athenian society) – invariably ends up succeeding in her erotic quest.

Perhaps the most famous *visual* image of female inebriation is the statue of the "drunken old woman". Like the Hags in *Ecclesiazusae* and *Wealth*, this statue portrayed an aged, wrinkled figure with the lolled back head, clutching an enormous wine-jar. This type of caricature was popular in later art, and was an easily identifiable image. Since the main *literary* representation of the drunken Hag comes from comic and satirical works (genres which are traditionally hostile to women of advanced years), and since there appears to be little evidence from serious sources, such an image should not be interpreted as proof of a widespread tendency towards alcoholism among aged – or indeed any other group of women at Athens.

In conclusion, the undeniable comic preoccupation with wine and related themes is central to the Dionysiac element of Greek drama, and to the festival spirit, in general. Both ancient and modern audiences have found the dramatic presentation of tipplers amusing precisely because people often behave stupidly and outrageously when drunk, or are more amorously inclined. A genre which, according to Aristotle, should portray men as being worse than they really are, would naturally choose to satirise this potentially funny aspect of human behaviour. Even more comical, it seems, than the sight of a tipsy hero was the vision of a boozy matron, who according to Athenian views on *sophrosyne* (modesty) should deport herself in the most seemly and inconspicuous manner possible.

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