The Staging and Meaning of Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen*

There is a broad scholarly consensus that Praxagora's revolutionary regime in *Assemblywomen* is a distasteful outcome, exposed to the greed of male malefactors, who take advantage of the new regime without paying their dues, and to the lust of terrifying crones, who are given the right to subjugate any handsome man they may fancy. When not as a sign poetic decline, most scholars interpret the play as the product of Aristophanes' supposedly "ironic" stance, designed to question the utopianism of Praxagora and, in some more sophisticated versions of the same approach, that of Aristophanes' own earlier plays. Irony, then, works as the redeeming grace of an otherwise allegedly incoherent and exceedingly vulgar play. By contrast, the present paper reinterprets *Assemblywomen* by providing a new reconstruction of the staging, which results in a radically different understanding of both the plot and the "message" of the play. In terms of methodology, it is crucial to take into account a number of performative factors. In particular, this paper will focus on actors and performance as opposed to characters as literary constructions, with a view to removing modern prejudices that stem from a character-oriented tradition and perhaps from a latent anti-feminism. The result will be twofold: on one hand, in terms of utopianism, it will become clear that *Assemblywomen* does not differ significantly from its 5th century counterparts, though it breaks new ground in recognizing the needs of diversified audiences; on the other, *Assemblywomen* will prove a remarkable example of experimentalism as regards formal structure and staging. The play's innovations have eluded scholars, yet unraveling them is the key to understand its unrecognized coherence and, indeed, its profound continuity with Aristophanes' earlier plays.

I. TWO AUDIENCES: "THE CLEVER" AND "THE LIGHT-HEARTED"

A passage found towards the end of *Assemblywomen* provides an appropriate starting point:

σμικρὸν δ’ ὑποθέσθαι τοῖς κριταῖσι βούλομαι·
τοῖς σοφοῖς μὲν τῶν σοφῶν μεμνημένοις κρίνειν ἐμέ,
τοῖς γελῶσι δ’ ἡδέως διὰ τὸ γελᾶν κρίνειν ἐμέ·
σχεδὸν ἅπαντας οὖν κελεύω δηλαδὴ κρίνειν ἐμέ.

But I want to give a little bit of advice to the judges: to those who are intellectual, to remember the intellectual bits and vote for me; to those who enjoy a laugh, to think of the laughs they’ve had and vote for me; in other words, I’m asking just about *everyone* to vote for me.

Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae* 1154–7 (tr. Sommerstein)

Aristophanes’ 5th-century plays are famously replete with claims to cleverness, which tend to coincide with claims to originality.[1] The cleverness-cum-originality motif is found in *Assemblywomen* as well (571-87), in a passage partly discussed below, so it is all the more surprising to find cleverness put on a par with popular tastes towards the end of the play. While it is obvious that Aristophanes was appealing to a wide range of tastes in his earlier plays too, an *explicit* claim that a good comedy should cater both to the sophisticated *and* to “those who laugh” —one may call them “the clever” and “the light-hearted” respectively— is found nowhere else in Aristophanes’ plays.[2] His emphasis on the popular side of his craft is even more impressive in the light of a passage from Aristotle, who likewise distinguishes between two types of audiences:

[1] See e.g. Prauscello (2013) and Wright (2012, ch. 3). Claims to originality are found in other genres too (*cf.* D’Angour 2011), but the emphasis on originality is definitely a mark of the comic genre, the word *kainos* working as ‘a catchword’, as is suggested by Zanetto (2006) 319. The tone of such claims is hard to determine, in that they may be construed as anything from ‘serious’ statements of poetics, as most scholars tend to believe, to comic boasts designed to elicit laughter precisely because they are not credible. For a clever defense of the latter cf. Major (2006).

[2] *Frogs* 1413 comes closest. *Cf.* Buis (2008) 106–107. See also Zogg (2014) 16–23, suggesting the possibility of interpreting this as much as some other Aristophanic metapoetic passages as evidence of a written circulation of the comedies (i.e. as actual books), and therefore of a twofold target of dramas. Another point of comparison is offered by the famous opening of *Wasps*, where Aristophanes pitches for being neither too clever nor too low.

> ἐπεὶ δ’ ὁ θεατὴς διττός, ὁ μὲν ἐλεύθερος καὶ πεπαιδευμένος, ὁ δὲ φορτικὸς ἐκ βαναύσων καὶ θητῶν καὶ ἄλλων τοιούτων συγκείμενος, ἀποδοτέον ἀγῶνας καὶ θεωρίας καὶ τοῖς τοιούτοις πρὸς ἀνάπαυσιν·
>
> But given that spectators are of two kinds—some are free and educated, and some are a vulgar crowd made of workers, laborers and the like—there should be contests and spectacles for the relaxation of the latter as well.
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> Aristotle, *Politics* 1342a18–22 (my tr.).

The contrast is striking, as Aristotle, in this most prescriptive part of the *Politics*, vents his contempt for “the vulgar crowd”. In fact, the passage from *Assemblywomen* is in many ways exceptional: perhaps for the first time in the history of Greek literature, there is a clear recognition of a twofold, and equally respectable, consumption of poetry. So the question arises: did *Assemblywomen* meet this demanding double standard? Modern scholarship would suggest that it did not. Skepticism about this comedy stems rightly from its plot and structure, particularly as regards the *second* part of the play.[3]

II. INCOHERENT AND IRONIC? THE PLAY AND ITS CRITICS

At line 724, when the women’s revolutionary bill has passed, the heroine Praxagora exits never to return to the stage anymore. Before the festive exodus, there follow two iambic scenes that seem to challenge the new communistic regime and, allegedly, to expose its undesirable absurdity. In the first, extended iambic scene (730–876), a dissident engages in an argument with someone who is already handing over his goods to the new regime. After the intervention of a “heraldess” who announces that the communal meal is ready, the dissident leaves the scene while delivering a short monologue, in which he declares the intention of profiting from the common goods without handing over his own properties. The second iambic scene features more unnamed characters and is even longer (877–1111). A young man wishes to have sex with an equally impatient girl, but his plan fails. To his horror, three hags claim the right to have sex with him first, according to the

[3] *Cf*. Sutton (1990) 90: “if only the first half of the play were preserved, it is doubtful that critics would value it much less highly than the previous extant Aristophanic comedies”.

laws of the new regime—one of the hags even produces the relevant decree. Eventually, the hags get the upper hand: the young man leaves the scene on a tragic note, lamenting his impending fate. In the final scene Praxagora's maid, who appears for the first time, sings the praises of the new regime and invites Blepyrus, Praxagora's husband, to enjoy the succulent dishes that remain after the communal meal.[4] Yet Praxagora's husband comments sarcastically on his own idea of sharing the food with the Athenian citizens at large (1148). This rather innocuous joke would have likely passed unnoticed, but in light of the two preceding scenes some scholars have claimed that even the very traditional festivity of the exodus shows cracks and ambiguities.[5]

The comic idea, namely the women's communism of goods and sex, results in alarming consequences. Apparently, corruption, greed and a sexually disastrous outcome threaten the equalitarianism of the new regime. The heroine is not on stage to promote and defend the new regime: halfway through the play, she disappears, never to return. In so doing, she exposes her brand-new society to the selfishness of reactionary dissidents and, sexually speaking, to the greed of *nouveaux*—or "*nouvelles*"—*riches.* The weakness of the comic project, moreover, coincides with a *structural* fragility of the second part of the comedy. The characters are now mostly unnamed and ephemeral figures: they remain on stage briefly and then vanish. This sequence of seemingly unrelated sketches ends up affecting the force and credibility of the play.[6]

In addition to the structural fragility of the second half, a further reason for skepticism is that the play features the longest scatological passage in the extant plays (320–73).[7] The men's obsession with defecation works as a counterpart to the women's sexual

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[4] Sommerstein (2016) rightly rules out the possibility that the male character active in the final scene might be Chremes.

[5] Blepyrus' joke, however, "should not be taken as indicating … that the feast has no real existence: it is merely an instance of a very common *topos* whereby a character offers free gifts or invitations to the audience and immediately cancels the offer", as is remarked by Sommerstein (2007) *ad loc*.

[6] For a survey, see e.g David (1984). At best, scholars have emphasised thematic links between the first and second part of the play. *Cf.* Russo (1994) 222.

[7] No other passage in the plays displays a comparable obsession on defecation, as is remarked e.g. by Hunter (1983) 140.

compulsion in the prologue, and scholars aptly describe the scene as an unnecessary second prologue.[8] The most facile and malicious explanation for this additional structural oddity is simply that the poet was well past his prime: an ageing scatologist, Aristophanes—so runs the allegation—was sadly short of ideas as he attempted to repeat the success of *Lysistrata*, to no avail. Froma Zeitlin summarizes this trend as follows:

> When not dismissed as an escapist farce simply played for laughs … the play is sometimes taken as a sign, even as a proof, of the failing powers of the comic poet in this late stage of his career. Aristophanes is deemed "aging or evertired",[9] or "elderly and peevish",[10] described as the "broken man who could sink to the tired dirtiness of the *Ecclesiazousae*".[11] Perhaps, as one ingenious critic surmises, Aristophanes may even have suffered a stroke.[12]
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> Zeitlin (1999) 175

These later approaches were likely influenced by Wilamowitz, who emphasizes the comedy's similarity with *Lysistrata* and Aristophanes' unsuccessful attempt to revive his old success.[13] At the same time, however, Wilamowitz stresses the poet's dissociation from the feminist and communist utopia, something that is perhaps responsible for a more recent critical strand. In his important commentary to the play, Massimo Vetta has put forth a sophisticated version of such interpretation, whereby the play's alleged shortcomings depend on a self-conscious strategy. According to Vetta, Aristophanes built the first part of *Assemblywomen* along the lines of his early plays, while in the second half, he argues, everything crumbles into pieces. On this view, Aristophanes engages in

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[8] *Cf.* e.g. Koch (1968) 109-11, Russo (1994) 22) and Drumond (2010).

[9] In a footnote, Zeitlin gives this quote to Murray (1933) 181 and 198.

[10] Macdowell (1995) 308.

[11] Taylor (1934) 210.

[12] *Cf.* Dover (1972) 195 n. 7.

[13] He stresses the weakness of Praxagora, badly modelled on Lysistrata, and Aristphanes' allaged need to cater to an incompetent audience: "Die Praxagora ist ihr nachgebildet, aber ein schwacher Abklatsch … Der Dichter ist verstimmt; die Forderungen eines geschmacklosen Publikums, denen er sich unterwerfen muß, sind ihm zuwider" (Wilamowitz 1927, 220).

nothing less than self-parody, aiming to poke fun at his own pre-war utopianism.[14] This choice, he adds, voices the old man's disillusionment after the Peloponnesian war, and the overall interpretation is part of a trend that Alan Sommerstein, Ian Ruffell and others have felicitously labeled "ironic".[15] In his last plays, so runs the ironic reading, Aristophanes would be intent on exposing the shortcomings of the fantastic worlds created by his heroes, possibly, in the words of an acute critic of this ironic trend, as an expression of his alleged "bitterness and frustration in a time of defeat and poverty".[16]

Though with different aims and results, both approaches emphasize the passing of time, whether biographic or historical: from this point of view, the "ageing scatologist" and the "disillusioned ironist" are symmetric figures. Let us consider them briefly in the light of Aristophanes' appeal to both "the clever" and "the light-hearted'. The "ageing scatologist" simply overdoes it: what is the point of devoting over sixty lines (311-371) to *both* "overdefecation" (cf. 351) and constipation (354-371)? Blepyrus' contradictory and overtly dysfunctional disorder is too much even for the light-hearted: the scatologic hyperbole would have proved annoying for almost everyone in the audience unless it had some other function that has escaped scholarly attention, as this paper will argue in due course. Conversely, the problem of construing Aristophanes as a "disillusioned ironist" is that such an irony is over-subtle even for the cleverest. Aristophanes' alleged bitter nihilism is out of place in the cheerful context of ancient comedy and it contradicts other indications that point to a more traditional understanding of "cleverness". Aristophanes tends to identify the "clever" (*sophon*) with the "new" (*kainon*). The "*kainon*" rhetoric

[14] "Aristofane ha probabilmente inventato la commedia antica che rinnega se stessa" (Vetta 1994, xxiv).

[15] The "ironic" turn in scholarship devoted to Aristophanes' fourth-century plays was by and large kicked off by Flashar (1967) and has found many supporters. Among the works with a specific focus on *Assemblywomen*, see Foley (1982), Taaffe (1993) 123–9, Saïd (1996), Hubbard (1997), Dettenhofer (1999), McClure (1999) 205–59, Reinders 2001 (243–79), De Luca (2005) 69–124, Christ (2008), Fletcher (2012), Saïd (2013) 159-211, Duranti (2015). Critics of the ironic trend include Sommerstein (1984), Rothwell (1990), Fiorentini (2005), Ruffell (2006), and Moodie (2012). Some recent articles run counter to the idea that *Assemblywomen* is not committed to Athenian politics: see e.g. Sheppard (2016), Tordoff (2017).

[16] Rothwell (1990) 7. Rothwell criticizes the ironic reading from both the historical and the dramaturgical point of view.

surfaces in *Assemblywomen* as well, when Praxagora begins to expound her program and appeals the audience directly, challenging them to penetrate the novelty of her new policy, which lies at the heart of the plot of *Assemblywomen*:

> καὶ μὴν ὅτι μὲν χρηστὰ διδάξω πιστεύω· τοὺς δὲ θεατάς,
> εἰ καινοτομεῖν ἐθελήσουσιν καὶ μὴ τοῖς ἠθάσι λίαν
> τοῖς τ' ἀρχαίοις ἐνδιατρίβειν, τοῦτ' ἔσθ' ὃ μάλιστα δέδοικα.
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> Well, I'm confident that I'll be giving good advice. But the audience – will they be willing to accept innovation, and not stay too much with the old and the familiar? That's what I'm most afraid of (*Assemblywomen*, 583-585, transl. Sommerstein).

This is the usual rhetoric of competition and originality, and it applies to the heroine's program as well as to the author's inventiveness, given that the chorus has just pointed out that the audience dislike hackneyed tricks and expect an original plan from Praxagora (577-80). In sum, nothing paves the way for "irony".

Either as a "scatologist" or as an "ironist" Aristophanes would likely have proven a defective *comic* playwright: rather than catering to both "the clever" and "the light-hearted", the result would have pleased neither of the two, except perhaps for the very few who could swallow over sixty lines of "tired dirtiness" and the even more limited number of over-subtle spectators inclined to detect irony in an incoherent plot and in a few conventional claims to originality. In sum, a different approach is needed to make good sense of the play

III. SCRIPT AND PERFORMANCE: A NEW APPROACH

Besides the exuberant jokes that abound in every Aristophanic play, what counts as "comic" is the art of pleasing the audience by castigating such figures as sycophants, demagogues and parasites. Plato's discussion of the ridiculous in the *Philebus* is relevant

here: what people enjoy is to see the pompous deflated and defeated.[17] This is precisely the function of the closing iambic scenes in Aristophanes' earlier comedies and, for that matter, in *Wealth*, Aristophanes' last extant play: to the delight of the audience, anyone who tries to undermine the comic utopia ends up catching hell. This kind of liberating punishment characterizes *Assemblywomen* as well, and the failure to recognize it is likely to depend on modern prejudices as well as on the very nature of the script and of its early transmission. A fresh approach is in order, covering three areas: the chorus, the characters and the actors. These areas are closely connected with the *staging*, something on which the manuscripts have unfortunately little to say. Martin Revermann has provided a meticulous refutation of what he refers to as the "significant action principle", which he traces back to Wilamowitz: according to such principle, the text of the manuscripts provides sufficient information for the theatrical understanding of the play.[18] If that were true, *Assemblywomen* may be doomed to failure, and it is no coincidence that Wilamowitz is so critical of this play. Yet the principle, as Revermann shows, is far from satisfactory and on occasion it proves flatly wrong.

III.1 THE CHORUS AND THE AUDIENCE

The chorus of *Assemblywomen* differs from that of Aristophanes' earlier plays in a number of ways. In editions of *Assemblywomen*, the list of characters usually opens with Praxagora followed by two or three elusive characters, called "First Woman", "Second Woman", and sometimes even "Third Woman". These are the interlocutors of the heroine in the opening scene, which consists of the meeting at dawn and of the rehearsing for the assembly. However, these women come on the scene together with the chorus.[19]

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[17] *Cf.* e,g, Lacourse Munteanu (2011) 95–7. Plato's argument here is by and large descriptive and, as such, reflects the practice of Old Comedy (cf. Tulli 2010). By contrast, Plato's discussion of comic humor in *Republic* is normative and aims at reforming comic practices, in a context, that of the communism of property and women, that famously parallels *Assemblywomen* (cf. nt. 53 below). The *Laws*' discussion of comedy strikes a middle ground between the descriptive and the normative (cf. Prauscello 2013).

[18] Revermann (2006) 49–62.

[19] Details such as Praxagora's exact point of origin (whether from the *skene* or from either of the *eisodoi*), the number of doors etc. are of course debated. See most recently the careful reconstruction by Mastromarco (2015), with further bibliography.

Accordingly, they are in a sense indistinguishable from the chorus women: the actors playing the women are dressed like the chorus, and mingle with the chorus right from the start.[20] During the rehearsing for the *ekklesia*, chorus and actors arguably sit against the front row seats, while Praxagora calls and scolds them. As Niall Slater has argued:

> Something quite extraordinary has happened in the theater, which gives added weight to her [i.e. Praxagora's] address: the unparalleled behavior of the chorus has transformed the theatrical space into an even better imitation of the political space on the Pnyx than that achieved in the *Acharnians*. We noted above that the chorus entered without a parodos song, which while unusual is not unparalleled. What *is* completely unparalleled and astonishing is the fact that, having entered, they then sit down. Moreover, they sit down facing the stage, with their backs to the audience. They become at once the front rows of the Theater of Dionysus and simultaneously and proleptically the front rows of the assembly on the Pnyx
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> Slater (2002) 212

Precisely as the chorus pretend to be members of the assembly, therefore, they merge with the audience, which is especially relevant because in the perception of the Athenians theatrical and political spaces were largely overlapping.[21]

Notionally, the watching Athenians *are* the *ekklesia*, and as such they share in the fictive situation of the rehearsing and are integrated into the theatrical and political play. In addition to Slater's point, the women, by "becoming the front rows", occupy the most prestigious seats, usually the privilege of the authorities. In so doing, they visually and theatrically foreshadow the revolution that is about to come, quite possibly promoting the audience's early identification with Praxagora's plan. [22]

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[20] *Cf.* e.g. Orfanos (2011) 171.

[21] *Cf.* e.g. Hall (1995).

[22] Moodie (2012) emphasizes the authority implicit in the women's frequent exchanges with the audience. In this contexts, it is worth mentioning Aristophanes' *Skenas Katalambanousai*, staging "a festival

III.2 THE IDENTITY OF UNNAMED CHARACTERS

The second relevant area is characters. In the first iambic scene, which features the duel between the dissident and the honest citizen (730–876), the main problem is the identity of the two contenders. While the dissident is almost certainly a new character, things are more complicated in the case of the honest (or gullible?) man who supports Praxagora's brand-new laws. Who is he? The manuscripts provide no clue, and on such matters they would "have no authority" anyway.[23] There are three possibilities:

1) He may be a new character altogether

2) He is to be identified with Chremes, who left the scene at 477

3) He is the Neighbor, who has left the scene to go home at 728–9.

In the past, scholars have taken various positions on the problem, but more recently Sommerstein has put forward a compelling argument. He points out that "since the character who now appears is doing precisely what the neighbour said in 728–9 that he was going to do, it can be taken as certain that he is the same person".[24] In other words, on leaving the scene the neighbor voices his intention to hand over his goods to the State, and this is precisely what the "honest" citizen is doing when the action resumes after the choral interlude.

If Sommerstein is right on this point, a powerful unifying factor binds together the first and the second half of the comedy. Sommerstein's solution rests on a very sound principle, which may be called the "mission accomplished principle": a given character comes back on stage to accomplish something announced on leaving the scene.[25] Who is

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which the fragments strongly suggest is a theatrical festival with women spectators" (Henderson 1991, 141).

[23] Ussher (1973) xxxv. *Cf.* Olson (2001), with further bibliography. Recent discussions of the tormented early history of the text of Aristophanes include Sommerstein (2010) and Andrisano (2013).

[24] Sommerstein (2007) *ad* 730.

[25] *Acharnians* features an early instance of the principle: *cf.* 202 and, after the *parodos*, 241-79. It helps prepare the actor's (re-)entrance, thus falling under the umbrella of "preparation" as discussed by Taplin (1977). As Sommerstein recalls as he tries to make sense of the "objectionable" disappearance of the dissident (2007, *ad* 875), "it is not uncommon in Aristophanes for characters who have been worsted to

the young man who fails to lie with the girl only to fall prey to the three hags? According to the standard reading, the scene is a kind of romance manqué, with the hags breaking the sweet dream of a young couple as a result of a brutally totalitarian regime. Yet the scene has a strongly comedic character, and the girl, in her exchange of crude jokes with the first hag, is hardly an angel. Stephen Halliwell, moreover, has drawn attention on the posture of the women, the obscenity of the songs, and the circumstance that the women are waiting for unspecified *men* (in the plural).[26] All of this conjures up a shabby *démi-monde*, which the audience was likely to associate with a kind of "sex district".[27] Even the so-called love duet between the young girl and her alleged boyfriend (952–75) is in fact a grotesque subversion of familiar *paraklausithyra*, the songs of the shut-out lover.[28] All in all, the romantic interpretation is by and large the product of modern expectations.[29]

Exposing the shortcomings of the traditional interpretation is a crucial step, but it does not solve the problem of the young man's identity. In an article devoted to the exodos of *Assemblywomen*, Douglas Olson notes in a footnote that he might be identified with the "second citizen", that is with the dissident.[30] Olson leaves it at that and does not elaborate

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depart threatening to avenge their discomfiture or frustration, after which neither they nor their threats are heard of again (cf, 1044 *Clouds* 1254-5, *Wasps* 1332-4, 1441, *Birds* 1052, *Wealth* 608-9, 944-950)". However, these cases are crucially different in three respects: first, their return on stage would provide no advantage in terms of unity and coherence; second, their threats are just that, as opposed to the clearly designed plan devised by the two characters leaving the scene in *Assemblywomen*; finally, and perhaps most importantly, the latter can hardly be said to "have been worsted".

26 Halliwell (2002).

27 Evidence for such informal zoning in Athens can be found e.g. in *Peace* 164–65. *Cf.* Davidson (1997) 80-82. The *Lysistrata*, too, toys with what may be called the "hetairization" of Athenian women (cf. Culpepper Stroup 2004).

28 *Cf.* Sommerstein (2007) *ad* 952–75.

29 See Ruffell (2006) 82–4.

30 "If the Second Citizen does not return as the δεσπότης, one other possibility deserves consideration. The Second Citizen exits towards the Agora and dinner at 876. Sixty lines of singing and quarrelling between the First Hag and the Young Girl intervene (877–937). Thereafter a male citizen (941) enters from the Agora, having eaten (988; with 978 *cf.* 692) and now ready for lovemaking. This character has traditionally been identified as the Νεανίας, though the manuscripts offer no support for so specific an

any further, and yet the suggestion has much going for it. The "mission accomplished principle" can shed light on the monologue that the dissident delivers on leaving the scene and, therefore, reinforce Olson's passing suggestion:

> νὴ τὸν Δία, δεῖ γοῦν μηχανήματός τινος,
> ὅπως τὰ μὲν ὄντα χρήμαθ' ἕξω, τοῖσδέ τε
> τῶν ματτομένων κοινῇ μεθέξω πως ἐγώ.
> ὀρθῶς, ἔμοιγε φαίνεται· βαδιστέον
> ὁμόσ' ἐστὶ δειπνήσοντα κοὐ μελλητέον.
>
> I certainly need some scheme, by Zeus, to let me, on the one hand, keep the property I've got, and also somehow share with these people in the communal meal that's being prepared. [*after a moment's thought*] That's got it right, as far as I can see. I must get into the thick of things on the dinner front, without delay
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> Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae* 873–6 (tr. Sommerstein)

The dissident, then, is determined to take advantage of the communal dinner, and presumably of the other benefits granted by the new regime. Will he succeed? At this point of the play, the "heraldess" has already proven his dismissive predictions wrong, so there is reason to doubt.[31] Now, the young man who looks for a girl in the following scene is coming from the banquet, as is suggested by a number of converging circumstances: his reference to wine, his brandishing of a (komastic) torch and the first hag's innuendo, whose mention of "dinner" apparently points to his self-serving attitude towards the new regime. [32] In other words, *the young man is in fact to be identified* with

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identification. It is just possible that the rôle could be given to the Second Citizen, who may indeed have slipped into the feast but in the end gets what he deserves" (Olson 1987, 165, n. 10). Olson's suggestion is mentioned, without elaboration, by Slater (2002) 222-3 and Tordoff (2007) 255.

[31] See Sommerstein (1984) 320. At 772 (and *cf.* 832) the dissident claims that nobody will surrender their goods to the state, but this is belied by ll. 805-6.

[32] 948 πεπωκὼς ἔρχομαι; 978 τοῦ δαὶ δεόμενος δᾷδ' ἔχων ἐλήλυθας; (that the torch is komastic is made clear by l. 692); 988 ἀλλ' οὐδὲ δειπνεῖς κατὰ τὸν ἐν πεττοῖς νόμον, on which see Ussher (1973) *ad loc.* "i.e. you don't raise quibbles about *eating* (he is, after all, just coming from the meal").

the dissident, who is eager to enjoy sex as part of the bodily pleasures often associated with wine.[33]

Once the real identity of the young man is established, most of the alleged problems and shortcomings of *Assemblywomen* disappear. The most obvious beneficial effect of this reading is that it helps make sense of a whole scene, and a long one at that, whose five characters would otherwise make no appearance elsewhere in the comedy: this is unparalleled in the extant plays, and removing this anomaly is no little improvement. A second and related point is that, interpreted in this way, *Assemblywomen* gains in force and coherence. The character who in the previous scene opposes the dissident is in fact the neighbor, something that creates a convenient link to the preceding part of the comedy. The same dramatic mechanism resurfaces here: like the neighbor, the dissident comes back on stage to finalize his plan as expressed in his exit monologue—and from this point of view his sexual desire is a natural completion of the symposium. Yet the most interesting consequence of this reconstruction is that it rules out all ironic readings of the play by doing justice to a structural feature of Aristophanic comedy, namely, in the words of Gregory Sifakis, the "liquidation of villainy":[34] the dissident's plan results in an epic failure as he is forced to yield to a series of increasingly monstrous hags, until he leaves the scene on a paratragic monologue. In other words, the villain is punished in the most emphatic and liberating way: the villain refusing to surrender his goods becomes himself a sexual commodity, an object to be torn and shared by others.[35] In sum, he eventually has to surrender *himself*.

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[33] The dissident and the young man are likely to be one and the same character and actor, immediately recognizable as such by the audience – even a generic mask (such as those discussed by e.g. Marshall 1999), combined with the voice and style of the actor, would have made the identification unmistakable. Ultimately, however, the substance of the argument would stand even if the dissident and the young man were overlapping figures.

[34] Sifakis (1992) 131.

[35] Many Aristophanic heroes are notoriously prone to allegations of being shameless and immoral, though this seems to be out of the question for Aristophanes' *heroines* Lysistrata and Praxagora: both plays arguably lend themselves to being construed along the lines of a moral narrative. This is of course a thorny question. Accordingly, "villain" stands here, more neutrally, for the antagonist(s) humiliated by the triumphant hero(ine).

The argument of this section largely depends on a particular staging of the play, which remains hypothetical. Interpretative hypotheses, however, are worth considering insofar as they help solve problems through a sound application of the principle of charity. The present section does precisely that: not only does it help to account for what is at first sight a wholly unparalleled scene; it restores the coherence of the play, including one of its most recurring features, namely a liberating happy ending. This is not to say that there are no differences between *Assemblywomen* and most of Aristophanes' earlier plays. The main difference, however, does not concern Aristophanes' alleged demise of utopianism.[36] Rather, the main difference is a formal and structural one: instead of *one* comic hero who castigates a number of opponents, the play features a number of pro-regime characters who confront and eventually castigate *one* persistent "villain", whose individual behavior stands for the potential selfishness of Athenians citizens at large.[37] It remains to consider how this reversal emerges.

In the first iambic scene (730-876), the neighbor engages in a verbal duel with the dissident. Remarkably, by the end of the exchange he is able to fight fire with fire by appropriating the dissident's technique, which consists of repeating obsessively the same "rhymes".[38] In other words, he unexpectedly gains the upper hand, something that Aristophanes seems to confirm by having the "heraldess" come on stage to announce that everything is working perfectly, and a delicious communal meal is ready for everybody (834–52). This belies the predictions of the dissident: in fact, she implicitly refutes him.[39] This foreshadows the real climax of the story, namely the second iambic scene (976-

[36] In both *Assemblywomen* and *Wealth* internal opposition to the utopianism of comic ideas is indeed stronger, if ultimately unsuccessful, than in Aristophanes' earlier plays. *Cf.* Ruffell (2014).

[37] This is of course a generalization: not only is Paphlagon the only opponent in *Knights*, but Lamachus and Socrates come close in *Acharnians* and *Clouds* respectively. Conversely, it is mainly Lysisitrata who manhandles the *proboulos* (note, however, that there is a strong sense of a group of women involved in that humiliation).

[38] *Cf.* the cues uttered by the dissident at 773–5 (all ending in -ουσι γάρ) and 799–801 (all ending in -ωσι τί). The neighbour appropriates and retorts this rhyme technique at 862–4, which include three cues ending in -ωσι τί. I take this as an instance of a wider tendency that has been referred to as the *structure tournante* of Aristophanic comedy. *Cf.* Thiercy (1986) 345–6.

[39] *Cf.* e.g. Ruffell (2006) 92–8.

1111). Here, the three hags comically castigate the dissident, thus producing the liberating effect the audience would have expected. In short, *Assemblywomen* cleverly reverses Aristophanes' usual technique, in that a plurality of hero-like figures castigate just one opponent rather than vice-versa. Incidentally, this makes perfect sense in a communist utopia that extols equalitarianism and "fulfils the characteristically comic impulses of hedonism in an exceptionally populist and 'democratic' manner".[40] The ultimate goal remains just same, but the new technique fully vindicates Praxagora's claims to novelty.

III.3 THE ACTORS AND THE HERO-LIKE *PROTAGONISTES*

A third area relevant to performance is worth discussing. It is very hard to renounce the time-honored habit of construing ancient plays as if they revolved around characters in the modern sense. Yet the absolute protagonist of the comic scene is no protagonist character, but the *protagonistes*, the first actor.[41] A full discussion of the distribution of the parts in *Assemblywomen* exceeds the scope of this paper, so suffice it to mention two fairly uncontroversial points. The first one is that Praxagora may well leave the scene halfway through the comedy, but this was not the case with the *protagonistes*, the first actor, who was no doubt onstage in all subsequent scenes. In the *exodos* of the comedy, the first actor played Praxagora's maid, who emphatically sings the praises of the new regime. As a consequence, the first actor could not possibly play the role of the dissident, who leaves the stage almost simultaneously. It is also very unlikely that he played the minor role of the girl in the second iambic scene, and I agree with Sommerstein that "it is tempting to suppose that he also played the heraldess" who, like the maid "is Praxagora's spokeswoman and agent".[42] Moreover, the first actor must have played the role of at least one of the three hags. An important point emerges: at least in the second half of the

[40] Halliwelll (1997) 148.

[41] See the important work by Lanza (e.g. 1989).

[42] Sommerstein (2007) 31.

comedy, and quite possibly throughout the play, the first actor plays only characters who strongly support the new regime.[43]

A consequence of this widely accepted distribution of roles among the actors is that *Assemblywomen* does not differ significantly from Aristophanes' early comedies in terms of utopianism. Granted, Praxagora as a *character* is not on stage to defend the regime, that is the comic idea, but the first actor or *protagonistes* was there. Scholars have long realized the semantic potential of doubling roles in Greek tragedy: for example, in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* "an audience attuned to actors' voices would have perceived the appropriateness of having both Odysseus and his instrument, the 'Merchant', played by the same actor".[44] *A fortiori*, this technique would have been at home in an overtly metatheatrical genre such as ancient comedy, in which the *protagonistes* may be more important than any given character or role. This is especially true in *Assemblywomen*, a play that obsessively revolves around disguising: here is an invitation for the audience to follow the *protagonistes* through his different roles and guises, which are always revolution-oriented and work as the heroine's instruments. In fact, the first actor stands for Aristophanes' comic idea, and as such he regularly prevails over his stooges, thus calling to mind the likes of Dikaiopolis or Trygaios. By humiliating his opponents, the Aristophanic first actor entertains the Athenian people, who partake in the scene through their early identification with the chorus and the fictive *ekklesia*.

IV. DRAMATURGICAL INNOVATIONS AND THE MEANING OF THE PLAY

In light of the proposed reconstruction of the play's staging and meaning, the hyperbolic and contradictory scatologism of the play works as a metaphor pointing to the dysfunction of Athenian politics.[45] The scatologic scene takes the shape of a second

[43] At 1–326 and 504–29 the first actor no doubt plays Praxagora. 478–503 being the province of the chorus, it remains to establish who plays who in the "male scene" of 327–477. Chremes, who supports the new regime, is clearly the dominant character, which is why I am inclined to think that he was played by the first actor, as is suggested by Vetta (1994) xxxiv.

[44] Liapis, Panagiotakis and Harrison (2013) 6. They refer the reader to the useful work of Hermann (1840) and Pavloskis (1991). *Cf.* also Marshall (2013), with further bibliography (see n. 4).

[45] Interestingly, scatologism acquires a new, metaphorical dimension in *Wealth* as well. Cf. Rosenbecker (2015).

prologue. This remarkable structural innovation is very meaningful insofar as the first and the second prologue work as two complementary pieces: the first prologue features women who are willingly disguised as men, sexually exuberant and eager to fix the shortcomings of politics; by contrast, the second prologue features men who are unwillingly disguised as women, prone to erotophobia and completely indifferent to politics.[46] This is arguably a self-conscious move: the second, scatologic prologue works as a retrospective foil for the first one (and vice-versa), so as to emphasize the lively cheerfulness of the women in comparison with the tired apathy of the (feminized?) men.[47] Old politics is indeed a shitty and contradictory thing,[48] which the first actor will happily leave behind. This squares well with another remarkable innovation, namely the *agon* manqué or *hemiagon*: the chorus incites the contenders and Praxagora performs her own half of the *agon*, singing the praises of the new regime.[49] Insofar as Praxagora is the first speaker, the expectation is that she will be defeated by the second contender, who typically refutes the first speaker and prevails.[50] One of the skeptical men is supposed to oppose Praxagora and defeat her, but no one takes up the challenge, with the result that Praxagora unexpectedly wins by forfeit.[51] The bottom line is that her scatological male opponents, who are so much into defecation that they fail to take part in the assembly, do not even take the field.

At this point, there is little room left for either the "ageing scatologist" or the "disillusioned ironist". This paper restores the coherence of the play in a number of ways: first, the whole action is rests on a revolution-oriented *protagonistes* or first actor, who invariably dominates his stooges and promotes the comic utopia; second, the innovative merging of the chorus and the audience in the rehearsing scene confers authority on the

[46] Koch (1968) 110 rightly emphasizes the exceptionality of a second prologue.

[47] The men's defecation may recall a form of birth, thus foreshadowing the humiliating role-reversal for the young man in the exodus.

[48] "C'est désormais le temps de la politique-merde" (Saïd 2013, 182).

[49] 571-80 (*ode*), 581-2 (*katakeleusmos*), 583-688 (*epirrhema*), 689-709 (*pnigos*). *Cf.* 514-6, which also works an "incitation" (*katakeleusmos*).

[50] The "rule" is explicit in the *Clouds* (940-48).

[51] In other words, *Assemblywomen* lacks the symmetrical parts of the agon (*antode*, *antikatakeleusmos, antepirrhema*, *antipnigos*), whose function is to promote the arguments of the second contender.

revolutionary plan and foreshadows the women's triumph; third, two further important innovations, namely the duplication of the prologue and the *agon* manqué, turn the scatologism of the play into a powerful reprimand to the Athenians' political apathy; fourth, and perhaps most important, by identifying the dissident with the young lover this paper restores the coherence of the plot as well as one of the defining features of comedy, quite possibly dating back to the very origins of the genre: a liberating happy ending at the expense of a scapegoat-like "villain". While remaining true to the spirit of earlier Aristophanic comedies, *Assemblywomen* is a remarkable piece of formal experimentalism.[52] It is no wonder that Praxagora's city was arguably a major influence, though one that it is hard to define, on a most memorable thought-experiment, namely Plato's *Kallipolis*.[53]

[52] English (2005) argues that Aristophanes' 4th-Century plays move away from "object humour" in favour of "physical humour", with an emphasis on the body and the look of the actors.

[53] The relationship between *Assemblywomen* and *Republic* remains "one of the most famous puzzles in classical Greek literature" (Murray 1947, 36). For Plato's use of *Assemblywomen* in the *Republic* in the wider context of a structural appropriation of comedy for philosophical purposes, cf. Nightingale (1995) 172–192 and, more recently, Capra (2018).

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