



‘DON’T LET ME BECOME A COMIC SHIT-POT!’: SCATOLOGY IN ARISTOPHANES’ *ASSEMBLYWOMEN*

This article examines scatology in Aristophanes’ *Assemblywomen*, and argues that the play sets out to subvert comedy’s normal scatological poetics. Old Comedy is usually a genre characterized by corporeal and scatological freedom. The constipation scene in *Assemblywomen* 311–73 is therefore highly unusual, since, while its language is scatological almost to the point of excess, it spotlights not scatological freedom but scatological obstruction. This article argues that this inversion is expressly linked to the play’s reversal of gender roles as part of its ‘women on top’ plot, which is in turn conceived as a direct challenge to Old Comedy’s normative poetics. The article further suggests that recognizing the *Assemblywomen*’s less than straightforward relationship to the norms of Old Comedy may help us to reassess how, and indeed whether, we should use Aristophanes’ plays to make conjectures about the genre as a whole.

Keywords: Aristophanes, scatology, gender, genre, Old Comedy

Introduction

In a passage of the parabasis of Aristophanes’ *Birds* (785–800), the chorus insist that ‘there is nothing better or sweeter than having wings’ (785: οὐδὲν ἔστ’ ἄμεινον οὐδ’ ἥδιον ἢ φῦσαι πετερά), and set out for the audience the freedoms they would gain were they so endowed. Essentially threefold, the privileges of flight listed by the chorus arguably encapsulate the fundamental corporeal freedom that is comedy’s generic calling-card:¹ with wings, you are free to eat

¹ On the comic body, see (with a focus on obscenity) J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse. Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*, second edition (Oxford, 1991), 187–203; (with a focus on costume) G. Compton-Engle, *Costume in the Comedies of Aristophanes* (Cambridge, 2015), 16–58; and (with a focus on food) J. Wilkins, *The Boastful Chef. The Discourse of Food in Ancient Greek Comedy* (Oxford, 2000), 28–9.

whenever you like (787–9: εἶτα πεινῶν... ἐλθὼν οἴκαδε, / κᾶτ' ἄν ἐμπλησθεῖς ἐφ' ἡμᾶς αὐθις αὐ κατέπτατο, 'If you're peckish... you can go home and fill your boots then fly back to join us');² to shit whenever you like (790–2: εἴ τε Πατροκλείδης τις ὑμῶν τυγχάνει χεζητιῶν, / οὐκ ἄν ἐξίδισεν εἰς θοιμάτιον, ἀλλ' ἀνέπτατο, / κόποπαρδὼν κἀναπνεύσας αὐθις αὐ κατέπτατο, 'If some Patrokleides among you needs a shit, he needn't shit his pants, but he can fly up, blow his load, and fly back down again'); and to screw whenever, and whomever, you like (793–6: εἴ τε μοιχεύων τις ὑμῶν ἐστὶν ὅστις τυγχάνει... εἶτα βινήσας ἐκεῖθεν αὐθις αὐ κατέπτατο, 'If there's some adulterer among you... you can go and fuck and fly right back'). If Niall Slater is correct to suggest that, throughout the play, wings function as a metatheatrical symbol,³ here their acquisition seems to represent a transformation into a specifically comic mode of theatricality: get your wings, and you too can gain the freedoms of the comic stage.

Given the significance of unfettered scatological release as both an essential freedom of the comic body, and a key marker of the genre's grotesque aesthetics, the constipation scene in Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen* seems highly unusual. Blepyrus, the first male character to take the stage, appears at line 311 dressed in his wife's nightie, and tries at first quite in vain to take his morning crap. His initial hopes that he might at least complete this undignified act, made more undignified still by his unfortunate attire, unobserved is thwarted when his neighbour spots him and takes the opportunity for a chat. The whole scene is full of comic bathos, from Blepyrus' costume through to his absurd prayer to the goddess of midwifery to deliver him of his blockage. The combination of the intense emphasis on scatology with the unconventional reversal whereby a comic character's scatological freedom is in fact obstructed makes this scene both hyper-comic and almost anti-comic all at once.

I would like to suggest that this scene, while unorthodox, is actually rather characteristic of Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen*, which transfigures a series of comic norms to quite de-stabilizing effect. In turn, the *Assemblywomen*'s sideways glance at comic convention can help us to reassess Aristophanes' paradigmatic status within his genre, and to

² Translations are my own throughout.

³ N. Slater, *Spectator Politics. Metatheatre and Performance in Aristophanes* (Philadelphia, 2002), 140: 'Wings in the play function as markers of self-conscious theatricality. Peisetaerus and Euelpides acquired their wings through a magic herb off-stage. Now it transpires that Peisetaerus can disburse wings to would-be Nephelokokkugians from baskets – that is, as costumes or stage properties.'

see instead how his works may be not only unrepresentative of Old Comedy, but even actively peculiar.

The *Assemblywomen*'s unusual qualities begin with its 'women on top' plot. Accidents of transmission should not lead us to assume that such plays were a common subcategory within Old Comedy. While three of our eleven surviving Aristophanes plays belong to this type (and we know of at least one more),⁴ female characters, as Taaffe has shown,⁵ made scant appearances in Aristophanes' plays before *Lysistrata* and *Women at the Thesmophoria* in 411 BC. Taaffe is incorrect in her inference that the dearth of women in Aristophanes' plays was typical of Old Comedy more generally, and Henderson, in his study of women in the comic fragments, has clearly established that other playwrights, especially (but not only) Pherecrates, frequently featured prominent female characters.⁶ However, prior to 411, women in comedy seem primarily to have been either mythical figures or *hetairai* ('courtesans'),⁷ and not the legitimate Athenian wives who appear in Aristophanes' three 'women' plays. Furthermore, there is no evidence in the fragments of other authors to suggest the women of their plays staged any kind of power grab analogous to those that underpin the plot of the *Lysistrata*, *Women at the Thesmophoria*, and *Assemblywomen*. As such, the 'women on top' plot first pioneered by Aristophanes in 411 appears to be something of a departure from the norm.

The *Assemblywomen* is arguably the most extreme inflection of this motif. As Taaffe⁸ and Zeitlin⁹ have observed, unlike in *Lysistrata* and

⁴ Of Aristophanes' fragmentary works, one, the 'second' *Women at the Thesmophoria* seems highly likely to have been a 'women on top' plot. For a discussion of this play, its fragments, dating, and plot see C. Austin and S. D. Olson, *Aristophanes. Thesmophoriazusae* (Oxford, 2004), lxxvii–lxxxix. The title and fragments of *Women Claiming Tent Sites* suggest it may have had elements of this theme. Otherwise, those plays whose titles suggest prominent female characters (*Lemnian Women*, *Phoenician Women*, *Danaids*) appear to have been wholesale parodies of tragic originals, and seem therefore to have been rather different in type to *Lysistrata*, *Assemblywomen*, and the two versions of *Women at the Thesmophoria*. On these kinds of tragic parodies in fifth century comedy, including those of Aristophanes, see M. Farmer, *Tragedy on the Comic Stage* (Cambridge, 2016), 88–101.

⁵ L. Taaffe, *Aristophanes and Women* (London, 1993).

⁶ J. Henderson, 'Pherecrates and the Women of Old Comedy', in D. Harvey and J. Wilkins (eds.), *The Rivals of Aristophanes. Studies in Athenian Old Comedy* (London, 2000), 135–50.

⁷ Henderson (n. 6), 144–9, contains a list of all the speaking female characters attested or likely to have featured in Comedy prior to c. 380. The vast majority are categorized by Henderson as 'mythical/legendary' figures.

⁸ Taaffe (n. 5), 109: '*Lysistrata* ends on a positive note precisely because the status quo is reinstated.'

⁹ F. Zeitlin, 'Aristophanes: The Performance of Utopia in the *Ecclesiazusae*', in S. Goldhill and R. Osborne (eds.), *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge, 1999), 167–97.

Women at the Thesmophoria, the play does not conclude with the women ceding power back to their menfolk.¹⁰ Rather, the *Assemblywomen*'s plot concerns a wholesale revolution, whereby the women of Athens vote themselves into power and institute a form of proto-communism, with all the city's assets and resources (including access to sex) shared equally among its inhabitants.¹¹ In this respect, the play is quite at odds with its two predecessors. In both *Lysistrata* and *Women at the Thesmophoria*, the women's power grabs are essentially aimed at re-establishing the status quo: *Lysistrata* and her companions complain that the war has taken their husbands from them, and wish to see them restored to their rightful place at the centre of the *oikos* ('household') (e.g. *Lys.* 99–100: τοὺς πατέρας οὐ ποθεῖτε τοὺς τῶν παιδίων / ἐπὶ στρατιᾶς ἀπόντας; 'Don't you long for the fathers of your children, who are away on campaign?');¹² while in the *Women at the Thesmophoria*, the women's central complaint is that Euripides' slanderous characterizations of women in his tragedies threaten the harmony of their domestic lives (cf. e.g. *Thesm.* 384–432).

The women's political revolt in the *Assemblywomen* is therefore considerably more disruptive than those found in Aristophanes' other 'women' plays. This article will suggest that not only does the play demonstrate an awareness of the disruptive quality of its 'women on top' plot, but that it actively leans into it, and explores the potential for not only political but also generic disruption. Throughout the play, the male corporeal freedom that is ordinarily a central part of comic plots and comic poetics is repressed and inverted, and, I suggest, this is presented as being the direct result of the women's rise to political power. As a result, the women's power grab is framed as a challenge to the fundamental conventions of Old Comedy.

The *Assemblywomen*'s strategic disempowerment of the male body is particularly central to two scenes, which together will be the focus of

¹⁰ On the failure of the women's revolution in *Lysistrata*, see also S. Saïd, 'L'Assemblée des femmes: les femmes, l'économie et la politique', *Les cahiers de Fontenay* 17 (1979), 33–69.

¹¹ On the politics of the *Assemblywomen*, see W. Casement, 'Political Theory in Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*', *Journal of Thought* 21.4 (1986), 64–79; M. Heath, 'Political Comedy in Aristophanes', *Hypomnemata* 87 (1987), 1–49; K. Rothwell, *Politics and Persuasion in Aristophanes' Ecclesiazusae* (Leiden, 1990); Zeitlin (n. 9), 167–97; K. M. De Luca, *Aristophanes' Male and Female Revolutions. A Reading of Aristophanes' Knights and Assemblywomen* (Lexington, 2005); J. Zumbrennen, 'Fantasy, Irony, and Economic Justice in Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen* and *Wealth*', *American Political Science Review* 100.3 (2006), 319–33.

¹² Taaffe (n. 5).

this article: the peculiar constipation scene discussed briefly above; and the penultimate scene in which three old women compete for the sexual attention of a young man. Both scenes present their gender role reversals as upending essential comic tropes, and use this to reflect more broadly on how the play's own plot threatens the norms of comic poetry.

On stealing from tragedy: a brief digression

Before examining these two scenes in detail, I would like to suggest that the way that the 'women on top' plot seems to strain at the edges of comedy's generic fabric is a product of its tragic affiliations. Of tragedies that survive in full,¹³ only one (Sophocles' *Philoctetes*) contains no female characters;¹⁴ and female choruses outnumber male by twenty-one to ten.¹⁵ Euripides is in particular characterized, by Aristophanes at least, as a figure associated with the (often lurid and shameless) female characters who populate his plays,¹⁶ but such prominent female roles were by no means a Euripidean innovation. Female characters appear to have been central to the works of even the earliest tragedians; several titles that strongly imply a female chorus are attributed to Phrynichus,¹⁷ and the first fully extant tragedy, Aeschylus' *Persians*, has the Persian queen Atossa as a leading character. Indeed, women are so central to tragic storytelling in the fifth century that Hall has even gone so far as to suggest that the archetypal tragic plot is one that centres around the transgressions of women in the absence of male authority.¹⁸ In these plots, the physical absence of a woman's husband or *kurios* ('male legal guardian') provides an opportunity, or even impetus, for her to act on inappropriate erotic urges, violate 'natural' laws, or otherwise flout

¹³ We must of course be careful in extrapolating from the few extant plays to the genre as a whole; however, in this respect there is no reason to assume that the surviving evidence is unrepresentative to any great degree, particularly since – as has been persuasively demonstrated by M. Wright, *The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy (Volume 1). Neglected Authors* (London, 2016) – many fragmentary plays dramatize the same myths or groups of myths as those that survive in full.

¹⁴ M. Katz, 'The Character of Tragedy: Women and the Greek Imagination', *Arethusa* 27.1 (1994), 81–2.

¹⁵ E. Hall, 'The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy', in P. E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1997), 105.

¹⁶ E.g. *Ran.* 1043–56.

¹⁷ E.g. *Phoenician Women, Daughters of Danaus*.

¹⁸ Hall (n. 15), 93–126.

male authority and transgress from her rightful place within the *oikos* into the political realm.

Comedy is certainly not shy about borrowing from its dramatic rival. Indeed, it has been well established that tragedy plays a central role in comedy's agonistic self-fashioning.¹⁹ Given that the errant wife is a staple of the tragic (and especially Euripidean) plays that Aristophanes so frequently parodies, the absence of such characters from his comedies (and indeed from those of other playwrights) prior to 411 seems remarkable, but is perhaps a testament to just how strongly this trope is associated with the tragic stage.

Aristophanes' 'women on top' plays, in which wives attempt to wrest political control from their menfolk, therefore appear to be something of a land grab, stepping into the 'transgressive woman' territory that Hall describes as archetypically tragic. Unlike his lost *Phoenician Women*, which appears to have been a direct send-up of Euripides' tragedy of the same name,²⁰ these plays do not piggy-back on a tragic plot, but seem rather to take the broader idea of the tragic, transgressive wife and to re-invent her for the comic stage. Each play sees the wives of Athens stage a revolution; and *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen* in particular show the women stepping into the political domain. In the context of a genre in which the manifestation, and celebration, of aggressive phallic masculinity is a conventional feature, these plots have the potential to be highly disruptive.²¹ Not only the visual

¹⁹ For detailed examinations of this topic, see P. Rau, *Paratragodia: Untersuchung einer komischen Form des Aristophanes* (Munich, 1967); F. Zeitlin, 'Travesties of Gender and Genre in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousae*', in H. Foley (ed.), *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (New York, 1981), 169–218; H. Foley, 'Tragedy and Politics in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*', *JHS* 108 (1988), 33–47; M. Silk, 'Aristophanic Paratragedy', in A. Sommerstein, S. Halliwell, J. Henderson, and B. Zimmerman (eds.), *Tragedy, Comedy, and the Polis* (Bari, 1993), 477–504; C. Platter, *Aristophanes and the Carnival of Genres* (Baltimore, 2007), 143–75; G. Dobrov, *Figures of Play. Greek Drama and Metafictional Poetics* (Oxford, 2001); S. Nelson, *Aristophanes and His Tragic Muse. Comedy, Tragedy, and the Polis in Fifth Century Athens* (Leiden, 2016); D. Sells, *Parody, Politics, and the Populace in Greek Old Comedy* (London, 2018). For paratragedy outside of the Aristophanic corpus, see especially E. Bakola, *Cratinus and the Art of Comedy* (Oxford, 2010), and Farmer (n. 4).

²⁰ A comic *Phoenician Women* was also written by Strattis; for a detailed discussion of this play, see Farmer (n. 4), 91–103. Since Euripides' *Phoenician Women* was produced after 412, Aristophanes' parodic retelling cannot realistically have pre-dated the *Lysistrata* and *Women at the Thesmophoria* in 411. Aristophanes' *Lemnian Women* appears to have been in a similar mould, and again most likely dates to the 410s.

²¹ As N. Loraux, 'Aristophane et les femmes d'Athènes: réalité, fiction, théâtre', *Mètis: Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens* 6.1 (1991), 127, notes, Aristophanes is of course not always consistent in characterizing comedy as masculine, and e.g. at *Clouds* (530) he personifies his plays as a young girl. The opposition between masculine comedy and feminine tragedy, however, need

aesthetics of Old Comedy, in which the comic phallus is a prominent feature, but even its plot dynamics are rooted in a celebration of specifically masculine fertility: Aristophanes' plays tumble towards their conventional comic ending, in which the hero (or sometimes another male character) is gifted with an often naked woman,²² whether in marriage (as in the *Peace*, *Birds*, and to an extent also *Lysistrata*), or otherwise (as in *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Wasps*, and *Women at the Thesmophoria*).²³ Against this background, even just to open a play (as Aristophanes does in the *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen*) with an all-female cast of characters, and not a comic phallus to be seen, must have seemed a notable divergence from comedy's usual visual aesthetic. To centre the entire plot around a female power grab is not only to stray into distinctively tragic territory, but to radically challenge some of comedy's most distinctive generic norms.

Repressing the male comic body in the *Assemblywomen*

Lysistrata and *Women at the Thesmophoria* each in different ways moderate the impact of their 'women on top' plots on the structure and aesthetics of the play. In addition to ending with power being handed back to the men of the city, *Lysistrata* makes an almost over the top feature of the comic phallus, as the women's sex strike leaves their menfolk in a stage of agonizing, if comical, excitement; and the *Women at the Thesmophoria*, despite its female revolution, actually focuses primarily on its male protagonists.²⁴ While these two plays therefore carefully manage the conflict between their female revolutions and the celebration of phallic masculinity that is ordinarily characteristic of the comic story-world, the *Assemblywomen* magnifies the disruptive potential of its 'women on top' theme. Not only does the

not be consistent, but merely sufficiently conventional, for Aristophanes to make a play of this opposition in his 'women' plays.

²² On the staging of mute, nude female characters in Aristophanes, see B. Zweig, 'The Mute Nude Female Characters in Aristophanes' Plays', in A. Richlin (ed.), *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (Oxford, 1992), 73–89.

²³ Two exceptions exist within Aristophanes' corpus of fully extant plays: the finale of *Clouds*, whose violence is highly uncharacteristic of comic endings; and *Frogs*, which reformulates the triumph of male fertility as a triumph over death, and ends with a dead tragedian being brought back to life from the underworld.

²⁴ On the interactions between gender and genre in the *Women at the Thesmophoria*, see Zeitlin (n. 19).

women's revolution appear to be both more complete and more permanent, but the play presents the disempowerment of the male comic body, and therefore the inversion of this key comic convention, as the direct result of the women's rise to power.

The entry of Blepyrus, husband of the women's ringleader Praxagora, to the stage is one of the most heavily scatological scenes in all of Aristophanes. The scene's exaggeratedly grotesque aesthetic is emphasized by Blepyrus' abundant use of scatological vocabulary, which amounts to the most scatological utterances of any character in Aristophanes' extant plays.²⁵ Henderson, in his study of obscenity in Aristophanes, describes scatological language and routines as 'the purest kind of obscene comedy',²⁶ and in this respect Blepyrus' constipation routine is almost hyper-comic. It is also hyper-masculine. As McClure has noted, 'words pertaining to defecation, including allusions to constipation, feces, public befouling, and urination have an exclusively masculine reference in Old Comedy'.²⁷ On my count, of the eighty-seven examples of scatological obscenity in Aristophanes' extant plays, only four are spoken by a female character.²⁸

While Blepyrus' routine is therefore in some ways conventional for both his gender and his genre, the scene also turns these norms on their head. The scene focuses not on his freedom, but rather his inability, to defecate; and this scatological failure is presented in parallel with a humiliating feminization. Blepyrus' entry to the stage, dressed in his wife's saffron gown and slippers, presents a clear visualization of the male–female role reversal that is the theme of the play, as Praxagora's appropriation of her husband's male clothing has resulted in Blepyrus

²⁵ Blepyrus uses ten scatological terms: at 317: κοπρεαῖος; 320: χέσσα; 322: χέζοντα; 345: χεζητιών; 347: γχέσαμι; 360: κόπρος; 368: χεζητιών; 371: σκοραμῖς; and 640: κάπιχεσοῦνται. Only Strepsiades in the *Clouds* comes close to this frequency, using a total of eight scatological obscenities in the play.

²⁶ Henderson (n. 1), 187.

²⁷ L. McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman. Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama* (Princeton, 1999), 214.

²⁸ These four scatological utterances are as follows: *Lys.* 440: ἐπιχεσεῖ ('you will shit'); *Ecll.* 78: πέρδεται ('he farts'); *Ecll.* 596: πελέθων ('dung'); *Ecll.* 1062: χεσεῖ ('you will shit'). In addition to the paucity of female scatological utterances, there are two additional points of interest. Firstly, all but one of these scatological terms (*Ecll.* 596, spoken by Praxagora) is spoken by an un-named female character. Secondly, despite being spoken by women, the subject of the scatological action is in each case male. At *Lys.* 440, an un-named woman threatens the Proboulos ('I'll tread on you so you shit'); at *Ecll.* 78, a woman jokes that her co-conspirator's husband farts under the weight of his walking-stick; at *Ecll.* 596, Praxagora chides her husband for interrupting her ('you'd eat dung before me'); and at *Ecll.* 1062 (discussed in detail later in this article), an old woman tells a young man he can use the toilet in her house.

being forced to adopt her clothing in turn.²⁹ Furthermore, Blepyrus' feminization is presented as a direct result of his scatological frustration. A counterintuitive link between scatology and feminization is first made in the scene when Blepyrus' neighbour catches sight of him squatting outside his house dressed in his wife's clothing. Blepyrus is wearing the saffron gown (κροκωτός) that is the conventional attire of comic women,³⁰ and his neighbour immediately describes it in scatological terms:

εἰπέ μοι,
τί τοῦτό σοι τὸ πυρρόν ἐστίν; οὔτι που
Κινησίας σου κατατετίληκεν;

Tell me, what's that yellow all about?
Did Cinesias squeeze one out on you?

(Eccl. 328–30)

As the skit progresses, we find that despite being (metaphorically) shat on, Blepyrus is himself unable to achieve the scatological release characteristic of the male comic body. He is seen squatting and straining throughout his entire lengthy exchange with his neighbour concerning the whereabouts of their wives (327 ff.), and is still going when his friend Chremes enters at line 372 (οὗτος, τί ποιεῖς; οὔτι που χέζεις; 'What are you up to? Not shitting, are you?'). Blepyrus' unfulfilled desire is emphasized through his repeated use of the desiderative form χεζητιῶν (345, 368). His scatological incompleteness is described in lurid metaphorical terms, first by his neighbour (351: ἀλλὰ σὺ μὲν ἴμονιάν τιν' ἀποπατεῖς, 'You must be shitting out a rope's length'), and then in a more extended passage where Blepyrus compares his predicament to having his door bolted (361: βεβαλάνωκε τὴν θύραν, 'it's bolted the door'). We are treated to the specifics of the exact foodstuff blocking Blepyrus up (354–5: νῦν δέ μοι / ἀχράς τις ἐγκλήσασ' ἔχει τὰ σιτία, 'There's a wild pear shutting all my food inside'), and it is even anthropomorphized (362: ἄνθρωπος ἀχραδοῦσιος, 'this guy from pear-town').

Towards the end of the scene, Blepyrus' failure is not only presented in effeminizing terms, but scatological and reproductive (and therefore

²⁹ The power dynamics of costume in this scene are discussed at length by Compton-Engle (n. 1), 74–82.

³⁰ See e.g. *Lys.* 42–5, in which Calonice describes the comic woman's typical attire including the κροκωτός, and *Thesm.* 253, where the κροκωτός forms part of In-Law's female disguise. See L. Stone, *Costume in Aristophanic Poetry* (Salem, 1981), 174–5; Compton-Engle (n. 1), 60.

by implication, sexual) fulfilment are presented as one and the same, so that the obstruction of comedy's normative scatological freedom becomes a kind of sterility.³¹ In his desperation, Blepyrus prays to the goddess of childbirth, Hileithya, to deliver him:

ὦ πότνι' Ἰλείθουα, μή με περιίδης
 διαρραγέντα μηδὲ βεβαλανωμένον,
 ἵνα μὴ γένωμαι σκωραμὶς κωμωδική.

Oh lady Hileithya, don't let me down
 when I'm busting but bolted!
 Don't let me become a comic shit-pot!

(*Eccl.* 369–71)

In characterizing Blepyrus' failure to defecate in female terms as the failed delivery of a baby, scatological obstruction is linked thematically to the play's gender role reversal, as well as to the obstruction of sexual and reproductive fulfilment. Finally, in the punchline of his absurd prayer, Blepyrus makes an explicit link between scatological poetics and comedy, and presents his predicament as a marker of his own generic affiliation.³² In turn, we are able to read outwards from this scene and see the women's revolution and their inversion of gender roles as a threat to the male bodily freedoms, sexual and scatological, which are characteristic of Old Comedy.

The constipation scene as a whole is both prolifically and insufficiently scatological, simultaneously hyper-comic and anti-comic. Blepyrus' failure to defecate, and therefore fulfil the scatological freedoms conventionally offered to male characters in comedy, is construed in explicitly female terms and linked to the gender role reversal of the play as a whole. Yet his over the top use of scatological language at the same time reinforces his identity as a comic man; and the scene's

³¹ It is interesting to note, given the close relationship between Old Comedy and iambus, that the connection between sexual prowess and scatology is also a theme in Hipponax's diarrhoea poem. M. West, *Studies in Greek Elegy and Iambus* (Berlin, 1987), 144, suggests (on the basis of a parallel with Petronius *Satyrice* 138) that in fr. 92 the speaker is undergoing a treatment for impotence, and it is this treatment that seems to result in the severe diarrhoea which follows. On the basis of this reconstruction, the poem's apparent link between the curing of impotence and diarrhoea would therefore form a mirror image to the *Assemblywomen's* link between constipation and impotence/infertility.

³² Compare *Clouds* 296, where, in response to Strepsiades' scatological language (295: κεί θέμις ἔστιν, νυνὶ γ' ἦδη, κεί μὴ θέμις ἔστί, χεσεῖω, 'I don't know whether it's holy or unholy, but I need to shit'), Socrates instructs him not to 'joke or use the language of comic poets' (οὐ μὴ σκώπει μηδὲ ποιήσεις ἅπερ οἱ τρυγοδαίμονες οὔτοι).

inversion of comic scatological tropes also insists upon their centrality to the genre by placing them in such extensive focus.

Old women on top

This strategy, in which the norms and conventions of comedy are replicated only through their subversion, recurs towards the end of the play. The penultimate scene of the *Assemblywomen*, in which three old women fight for possession over a young man, enacts for the audience the results of Praxagora's plans for sexual revolution (611–18). Under her regime, not only men, but also women, even old women, are to be able to choose the partners they want (615: τῷ βουλομένῳ), and men will have to submit to satisfying less desirable (617: αἱ φαυλότεραι) women before they can take their pick of the young and beautiful.

The scene is in every way a direct inversion of the norms of comic endings. This is true most obviously in the gender-reversal of the comic trope whereby a man wins possession of a young girl; and the emphasis on the fact that, instead of being passive, silent sexual objects (as the women claimed by male characters in the finales of the *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Wasps*, *Peace*, *Birds*, *Lysistrata*, and *Women at the Thesmophoria*), the women, both young and old, are actively in pursuit of sex. Perhaps more crucially, as Zeitlin has observed,³³ the scene also contravenes the comic convention of rejuvenation and renewal. A significant number of Aristophanes' extant plays feature elderly protagonists, and in each case the play ends with the old man rejuvenated and enjoying a new lease of life. This is a particularly prominent theme in the *Wasps*, but features also in the *Acharnians*, *Knights*, and *Clouds*,³⁴ and is arguably another manifestation of Old Comedy's phallic aesthetics: even old men will (as it were) rise up again with new vitality.

It is therefore notable that, unlike the old men of Aristophanes' plays, the old women in the *Assemblywomen* are not only not rejuvenated in any way, but are repeatedly presented as being close to, or even as

³³ Zeitlin (n. 9) argues that this unusual reversal is connected to the relationship between the *Assemblywomen*'s utopian plot and golden age myths such as the myth of Kekrops.

³⁴ On the topic of old men and rejuvenation in Old Comedy, see T. Hubbard, 'Old Men in the Youthful Plays of Aristophanes', in T. Falkner and J. de Luce (eds.), *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature* (New York, 1989), 90–113.

good as, dead. The scene with the old women makes an almost exaggerated feature of funereal imagery. The result is an active subversion of audience expectation: comedies are supposed to end in celebration and renewal, and by replacing celebration with death and mourning, this scene threatens to set the play's trajectory off-kilter. The play's inversion of gender roles with its 'women on top' theme is therefore presented as turning the comic plot on its head.

The scene opens with a dispute between an old woman and a young girl, who are each trying to take advantage of the new sexual freedoms offered by Praxagora's regime. The scene is therefore set up as a conflict between youth and age, and the eventual triumph of the older women over the girl accordingly emphasizes the way in which Praxagora's regime serves to actively disrupt the norms of procreative sex. This disruption is explicitly linked to the man's loss of political rights. The women repeatedly refer to their sexual rights as established by law (e.g. 1049: παραβῶσα τὸν νόμον, 'defying the law'; 1055: ὁ νόμος ἔλκει, 'the law compels you'; 1077: κατὰ τὸν νόμον, 'according to the law'), and when he tries to negotiate some kind of exemption to the law, the young man is told that as a man he no longer has the authority (1024: κύριος) to negotiate any contract over the value of a single measure of grain (1025: μέδιμνον), thereby placing him in the legal position previously assigned to women.³⁵

The scene's topsy-turvy inversion of comedy's conventional old man/young girl pairing is associated with death and funerals throughout the scene. The young girl repeatedly characterizes her rival as deathly, calling her 'rotten' (884, 926: ὦ σαπρά) and 'Death's sweetheart' (905: τῷ Θανάτῳ μέλημα). Funereal imagery accumulates throughout the young man's interaction with the old women. He first claims to be worried about incurring the jealousy of the first woman's boyfriend, who he claims is a famous painter of funeral jars:

<Av> ἀλλ', ὦ μέλ', ὀρρωδῶ τὸν ἐραστήν σου.
 <Γρ^ο> τίνας;
 <Av> τὸν πῶν γραφέων ἄριστον.
 <Γρ^ο> οὗτος δ' ἐστὶ τίς;
 <Av> ὃς τοῖς νεκροῖσι ζωγραφεῖ τὰς ληκύθους.

Man: But sweetie, I dread to think of that boyfriend of yours.

First Old Woman: Who?

³⁵ Cf. Isaeus 10.10, in which the speaker claims that women, like minors, are not able to negotiate a contract over the value of a single *medimnos* of barley.

Man: The famous painter.

First Old Women: Who's that?

Man: The one who decorates oil bottles for the dead! (Eccl. 994–6)

The use of the verb ζωγραφέω ('decorate') here, literally meaning 'to paint from life' is a nice touch, creating as it does an immediate juxtaposition between the dead (τοῖς νεκροῖσι) and life (ζω-), which mirrors the conflict between fertile youth and sterile old age in the scene. As the interaction continues, it is not only the old woman, but the young man's sexual encounter with her, that is construed as funereal. Finally submitting to the first old woman, the man instructs her to prepare her bed with herbs, oil jars, and other props associated with the preparation of corpses:

ὑποστόρεσαι νυν πρῶτα τῆς ὀριγάνου
καὶ κλήμαθ' ὑπόθου συγκλάσασα τέτταρα,
καὶ ταινίωσαι, καὶ παράθου τὰς ληκύθους,
ὔδατός τε κατάθου τοὔστρακον πρὸ τῆς θύρας.

Lay out marjoram,

break off four sprigs and lay them out underneath,

bind on a headdress and put out the oil jars,

and a pot of water by the door.

(Eccl. 1030–3)

Male disempowerment is therefore explicitly linked to the inversion of the celebratory norms of comic endings. As in the earlier scene with Blepyrus, where male political and sexual disempowerment are linked with scatological constraint, the women's dominance over the young man's body is not only sexual but his scatological functions are also obstructed. In lines 1059 and following, the young man in his desperation to escape attempts to stall for time by saying that he needs to use the toilet (1059: ἴθι νυν, ἔασον εἰς ἄφοδον, 'let me go to the loo'), since otherwise he will soil himself. However, the old woman refuses to let him go, telling him that he will have to wait, and that he can 'shit inside the house' (1062: ἔνδον χεσεῖ).

The young man's disempowerment may be further enacted by a visible loss of erection. When he first appeared in the scene he was described as 'carrying a torch' (978: τοῦ δαὶ δεόμενος δᾶδ' ἔχων ἐλήλυθας). It has been suggested by Vetta that, since a torch would itself not be cause for much remark given the night-time

setting,³⁶ the 'torch' here indicates the young man's phallus, and he is therefore an ithyphallic figure.³⁷ However, at line 1058, the second old woman addresses the man as 'softy' (μαλακίων), which, while a common endearment, additionally suggests that by this point his comic phallus may no longer be erect. If this interpretation is correct, given the importance of the phallus as a symbol of the comic genre, the overturning of comic norms that is a theme throughout this scene would receive some additional visual emphasis. As in the scene with Blepyrus, the disempowerment of men, and the frustration of their pursuit of typically comic corporeal pleasures, is presented as overturning not only gender norms but also the norms of the comic genre. Scatological release is obstructed, male desire thwarted, and celebration replaced with death and mourning.

At the same time, the very inversion of these norms serves to reinforce just how central they are to the genre. The constipation scene, and the penultimate scene with the old women, seem strange precisely because they *are* strange. Perhaps the *Assemblywomen's* peculiarities in this regard go some way towards explaining its unpopularity with some modern critics, who have described the play as an out and out failure,³⁸ the result of the poet's declining powers,³⁹ and perhaps even his declining health.⁴⁰

Conclusions

The constipation scene, while certainly unusual, also encapsulates the *Assemblywomen's* overall relationship to its genre. Far from being

³⁶ Cf. *Ecll.* 834–52, in which a herald calls the men to dinner. Since it is already clear that this post-dinner scene is taking place at night, there is no need to reinforce it at this point, and it therefore seems unlikely such temporal scene-setting is the function of the comment.

³⁷ M. Vetta, *Le Donne All' Assemblea* (Milan, 1989), *ad loc.* Vetta's interpretation of this line is further bolstered by the fact that fire imagery is commonly used as a sexual euphemism in Greek (cf. Henderson [n. 1], 47–8, 177–8). A torch metaphor is the subject of an extended joke at *Vesp.* 1372–7, although the torch here is used to denote female, rather than male, sexual anatomy. It therefore seems highly plausible that the torch here indicates the young man's phallus, since this would fit within this common pattern of euphemism, as well as making sense within the context, as Vetta argues.

³⁸ C. Whitman, *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Boston, 1964), 9: 'It is hard to read any play, except possibly the *Ecclesiazusae*, and feel that it is falling apart.'

³⁹ D. Sutton, 'Aristophanes and the Transition to Middle Comedy', *LCM* 15.6 (1990), 91: 'The play's deficiencies can probably be attributed to the poet's declining powers. At most, these deficiencies might perhaps be taken as symbolic of the declining vitality of Old Comedy.' See also A. H. Sommerstein, 'Aristophanes and the Demon Poverty', *CQ* 34:2 (1984), 314: 'The decline in freshness, in verbal agility, in sparkle of wit, in theatrical inventiveness... may be put down to advancing years and diminishing inspiration.'

⁴⁰ K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley, 1972), 195 n. 7: 'The possibility that Aristophanes had had a stroke cannot be completely excluded.'

paradigmatic, the play (along with its companions *Lysistrata* and *Women at the Thesmophoria*) is an outlier within the comic tradition, an experiment in what happens when you import tragedy's central plot device and place 'women on top' in the comic universe. The result, as we have seen, is that this inversion of gender hierarchies is profoundly unsettling. If male bodily freedom both sexual and scatological is obstructed by the women's power grab, so the play seems to suggest, the genre's distinctive aesthetic combination of the grotesque and the celebratory is similarly impeded. In short, a 'women on top' plot taken to its full conclusion (unlike in the two plays of 411) threatens not only comedy's conventions, but its very poetics.

Examining the *Assemblywomen*'s far from straightforward relationship to the conventions of comic poetics and plotting can help us to reassess our understanding of Old Comedy as a whole. If Aristophanes is not in fact so paradigmatic as we might assume (or hope, given the state of our evidence), then we ought to look differently at the fragmentary corpus. In particular, we should reconsider if not whether, then at least how, we use Aristophanes' plays to make conjectures about the lost plays of his contemporaries and rivals.

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