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## **Cross-dressing in Greek Drama: Ancient Perspectives on Gender Performance**

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## Cross-dressing in Greek Drama: Ancient Perspectives on Gender Performance<sup>1</sup>

In the past, cross-dressing in Greek theater has been viewed either analogously through Shakespearean drama or through the bias of one's own modern views on gender, to the detriment of further exploration on the topic. Titles like "Becoming Female"<sup>2</sup> may catch the attention of the general public in a bookstore, but the modern idea of the "transgender" individual should not be applied to an ancient Greek, as no such construct of identity existed in that time period, so far as the evidence available suggests. Tackling the category of gender expression, then, must always be handled with care and precision. In order to accomplish this, the sources for this paper will be limited entirely to cross-dressing within the context of Classical Greek Theater, something for which there is a plethora of evidence. This paper will present examples of cross-dressing from a selection of both comic and tragic plays, examine the ways in which this transgression of normative behavior is handled within the plays, and, finally, draw conclusions based on these considerations. By following this method, it may be possible to ascertain how the Greeks felt about cross-dressing in general, and how these views varied.

Drama is suitable for this study primarily because of its significance within Greek society. Attending plays in Classical Greece was considered a socially enriching experience. The size of some of these theaters suggests that upwards of 10,000 men could sit relatively

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<sup>1</sup> The term "cross-dressing" here should not be seen as an application of modern ideas of gender with regard to transvestitism, but rather as a simple marker of the act which was taken, of one sex portraying themselves as the other while on the stage. Ormand states that the Greeks did not share the modern view that cross-dressing would be linked to homosexuality or drag, nor did they consider sexuality as modern individuals do, and so this act should not be considered through modern ideas of gender performance (2003, 27-8).

<sup>2</sup> Katrina Cawthorn's (2008) "Becoming Female: The Male Body in Greek Tragedy," is a book which has been used for this paper and which does not extrapolate from the evidence as much as its title might suggest. However, its title is a good example of one of the ways in which the spectacle of Greek sexuality has been exploited by some modern authors.

comfortably while watching these plays.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the importance of the theater on a social scale, the plays themselves were also notable. They worked as reflections for society itself, showing the men watching them what it was that they found amusing or matters for concern in their own society. In fact, many Classical Greek comedies were social commentaries.<sup>4</sup> Tragedy, likewise, provided an outlet for the social conscience, a distortion of society which brought some relief to those for whom the issues at hand may be relevant.<sup>5</sup> Duncan aptly expresses this, saying, “theater is the place where the political regulations and disciplinary practices that produce an ostensibly coherent identity are placed in view”.<sup>6</sup> Studying these works which had the potential for such an impact on their audiences, then, can bring to light truths about the society in which they were written.

However, the role of drama in Classical Greece went beyond mere social obligation: it was a deeply ritual rite as well, one tied inexorably to the cult of Dionysus.<sup>7</sup> Plays were watched during the Dionysia and Lenaia, annual dramatic festivals.<sup>8</sup> During the Dionysia, three tragedians would produce three tragedies and a satyr play, along with the comedies of five comedic playwrights, to be judged both for prizes and for the glory of the god.<sup>9</sup> While a significant ritual practice, the Dionysia was largely a social and political function, with wealthy citizens playing

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the Theater of Dionysus in Athens could seat 4,000 to 6,000 individuals during its wooden phase, and could seat three times as many people once it was rebuilt in stone (Powers 2014, 11).

<sup>4</sup> Henderson 2010, 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Taplin 1978, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Duncan 2006, 10.

<sup>7</sup> But this social and religious importance applies largely to a body comprised only of men, *the demos*, a group of adult male citizens who effectively controlled the *polis*. With men participating in all the major aspects of theatrical performance, it is difficult to tell whether women were even meant to watch these plays. Henderson discusses the presence of women in the audience, noting that they were not meant to be present at such plays, but due to the inclusive ritual nature of the Greek theater, there were inevitably some women there (1991, 146-7). Additional support for this view comes from Roselli’s recent research on women in the theater (2011, 193-4).

<sup>8</sup> The Lenaia was a smaller affair, taking place mainly for an Athenian audience; the Dionysia, however, was a “show-case” of the dramatic talent of Athenian playwrights, a spectacle which even foreigners could attend (Wiles 2000, 52-4).

<sup>9</sup> Comedies were added to the line-up later than tragedies, when the tyrant Peisistratus updated the Athenian Dionysia, along with other institutions (Csapo 2014, 97-8).

an important part in the development and production of the plays.<sup>10</sup> These officials worked with the playwright, and though relatively little is known about the lives of those who wrote plays in Classical Greece, the fact that their names were recorded shows that their importance in the Greek world was far from negligible.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from these, there is one other way in which Greek theater is uniquely qualified to be studied for this paper: cross-dressing performs a central role in the production of these plays. Female parts could not be played without some cross-dressing on the parts of the actors in Classical Greece, because all of them were adult males. They all wore masks, denoting which character they were playing at the time, and perhaps showing feminine traits, such as lighter paint, for female characters.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it is unlikely that there was any single actor chosen to play the parts of women, but men would switch back and forth between male and female roles as the play demanded. The necessity of this practice is made clear by the numbers of actors within the play, a number noted to be no more than three in the Classical period, and even less before this time.<sup>13</sup> Davidson suggests that the actor playing Deianeira in Sophocles' *Trachinae*, for example, might also play the role of Heracles in the latter half of the play.<sup>14</sup> Having the same few actors play every part would make cross-dressing necessary, especially when women's parts take up a large number of the characters within a play, over thirty percent on average, and in some plays, up to ninety percent.<sup>15</sup> This is important to note, for it means that no single actor

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<sup>10</sup> The civic responsibilities were taken on by the *choregos*, a wealthy citizen who was chosen by the state to pay for the production costs and make executive decisions about the production and chorus for the play he financed (Wiles 2000, 34-5).

<sup>11</sup> Wiles considers it noteworthy that the playwrights continued to write into an age older than later writers (2000, 170-1).

<sup>12</sup> Davidson addresses the lack of knowledge currently available on conventions of dress in tragedies, but speculates on how femininity might be shown through dress by masks or other contrivances (2005, 204-5).

<sup>13</sup> Wiles 2000, 159.

<sup>14</sup> Davidson 2005, 204.

<sup>15</sup> Griffith 2001, 117.

could be picked out to play the parts of women, and therefore, that acting in female roles could not lower one's status as an actor.

The plays examined in this paper were chosen for two purposes: to show the ways in which cross-dressing was handled within the context of plays and to illustrate how other plays handled less sensational gender slippage. To this end, a selection of plays by Euripides, Aristophanes, and Sophocles have been chosen, principally because these authors were prolific during the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of a singular time period in Greek society, rather than contending with differing political and social views which would become a factor among a selection of much earlier and later authors.

### **Transgressive Behavior in Euripides' *Bacchae***

The first playwright to be considered here is Euripides. A Classical tragedian, Euripides was producing plays from the middle to the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, both before and during the Peloponnesian War. Though his exact date of birth is not certain, it is known that Euripides produced plays at the tragic festival starting in 455 BCE and died in ca. 407 BCE. After this, the *Bacchae* was produced for the first time, winning an award for him posthumously.<sup>16</sup> Two plays by Euripides will be addressed here, the *Bacchae* and the *Hippolytus*.<sup>17</sup>

The *Bacchae* tells the story of Pentheus, a young and headstrong king of Thebes who must deal with the relatively new god, Dionysus. Because Dionysus' mother, Semele, died before she could give birth to Dionysus, her family (of which Pentheus is a part) does not believe that she truly bore the son of Zeus, and as a result Dionysus is not being worshipped in Thebes as he should be, nor is his mother honored. After inciting the women of Thebes to become maenads

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<sup>16</sup> Pelling and Wyke 2014, 83.

<sup>17</sup> The section on the *Hippolytus* will be delayed until after the comedies of Aristophanes have been addressed due to its relation to this overall argument.

in the hills outside of the town, Dionysus confronts the young king, and after making him dress as a maenad, eventually leads Pentheus to his death at the hands of his own mother. The play is the only extent tragedy which features cross-dressing as a central part of its plot, and is therefore indispensable for this paper.

The *Bacchae* displays social norms through the beliefs and actions of the young king Pentheus, a relatively traditional Greek male before he is tricked into inappropriate behavior by Dionysus. By interpreting the actions of others in the play through the lens of Pentheus' reactions to them, it is possible to understand what constituted normative social behaviors when the play was produced. For example, Pentheus' reaction to the women in the *Bacchae* suggests that the Greeks expected women to remain contained in their households and act modestly. As for men, Pentheus rejects the excess displayed in the frivolous clothing and actions of other men. Overall, Pentheus seems to encourage the *status quo*, that is, for men to maintain power and control over themselves and their surroundings. However, the young king transgresses these norms in many ways, the most notable being his cross-dressing at the end of the play and his relinquishing of power to the man whom he does not know is Dionysus. This transgression leads to an ultimate punishment of death.

Transgressive behavior abounds in the *Bacchae*, starting with the titular character of Dionysus. The persona of Dionysus has long been androgynous in nature and he is known to push the boundaries of what the Greeks found to be correct behavior.<sup>18</sup> However, this seems to be allowed in Greek society, both because Dionysus is a foreign, specifically Eastern divinity, and most importantly, because he is a god. Still, throughout the beginning of the play, Dionysus is not acknowledged as a god by the Thebans, but is seen as a man. Therefore, the ways in which he is treated both by Pentheus and others can be an indication of how his mode of dress differs

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<sup>18</sup> Carpenter 1993, 204.

from the norm. For example, when Pentheus first meets Dionysus, he notes, “Well, stranger, you are not bad-looking—to women, at least” (Eur. *Bacc.* 362).<sup>19</sup> Pentheus seems to be accusing Dionysus of the crime of effeminacy and sexual deviancy, and he continues, mocking the god’s long, curling hair and light complexion- both feminine traits (Eur. *Bacc.* 363-5). This can be seen especially when Pentheus, enraged, interrupts Dionysus, exclaiming that the only reason he could have for practicing his rights in darkness would be to seduce women (Eur. *Bacc.* 396-7). It would seem, then, that though Dionysus appears effeminate in dress, he is nonetheless viewed as a threat to women, and possibly to Pentheus himself. This threat comes from Dionysus because of his undefinable role, since a character who does not fit neatly into gender-normative lines might harm the equilibrium of gender relations. Pentheus would appear to be right in this respect, as Dionysus has caused disorder by drawing the women of Thebes out of their proper places in the town. Nevertheless, because of Dionysus’ divine nature, his femininity cannot be seen as truly transgressive; however, Pentheus’ cross-dressing later on in the play is.

Pentheus’ accusations and anger are not wholly the fault of Dionysus, as his concerns also lie with those women of his city who have been led astray into the wilds without escorts or proper supervision. As can be seen toward the end of the play, Pentheus’ mind has been stuck on these women, envisioning almost voyeuristically the kinds of behaviors he hopes and dreads to see (Eur. *Bacc.* 280-1). This trend continues even when Pentheus is preparing to go out and sneak up on the maenads, as he remarks, “I imagine they are there now in the bushes, like birds in the sweet clutches of love-making!” (Eur. *Bacc.* 815-6). Hans Oranje argues that Pentheus’ thoughts have been perverted by the god from his honest concern for the women earlier.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> All translations and line notations of Euripides’ *Bacchae* here and after are from the translation by Franklin, 2000. Ormand suggests that Pentheus might be “protesting too much” here, and actually finds the god-in-disguise attractive (2003, 11).

<sup>20</sup> Oranje 1984, 90.

However, it is likely that, since the sexual deviancy of the maenads was constantly on Pentheus' mind, the madness of Dionysus only served to bring his thoughts to his lips, rather than inserting those perversions in the first place. Zeitlin claims that Pentheus is trapping himself even as he hopes to trap the women, leaving himself open to discovery in his lust-induced recklessness.<sup>21</sup> In either case, it is clear that Pentheus' obsession with the women, and his willingness to spy on them as far as the god allows, goes much farther than it should for a ruler who ought to be concerned only for the safety of his citizens' wives, especially as it leads him to cross into a feminine role himself.

The scene leading up to Pentheus' cross-dressing is perhaps just as important as the clothing change in itself. Starting with the moment of Dionysus' realization of how he will punish the headstrong king, the play becomes a back-and-forth between the men as the god coaxes Pentheus into something which "only madness" could lead him to (Eur. *Bacc.* 721).<sup>22</sup> Although Pentheus is being manipulated by the god, one can still see his reluctance to cross over this boundary of social propriety. For though he wants to see the maenads misbehaving, as soon as Dionysus mentions that Pentheus would have to wear the clothing of a woman in order to spy on them, Pentheus becomes cautious, saying, "shall I change from man to woman?" (Eur. *Bacc.* 689). Pentheus' propriety would not allow him to dress as a woman even for a temporary disguise, showcasing again the fragility of masculinity in his worldview. The questions following this passage are particularly interesting, as Pentheus asks Dionysus what exactly he might have to wear and continuously changes his mind, saying that he cannot dress as a woman even as he is drawn in by his own lust for them.

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<sup>21</sup> Zeitlin 1985, 71.

<sup>22</sup> I.e. cross-dressing.



However, as the god persuades the young man, he assents, only worrying whether his people should see him dressed so shamefully and how they might avoid the eyes of others (Eur. *Bacc.* 709-710). There was quite clearly a worry, then, about the perceptions of others in seeing their king dressed as a woman, and especially as a maenad. It is interesting that this aspect of his punishment was not emphasized more in the text itself, since even Dionysus notes in his aside that he “want[s] him to be laughed at by the Thebans as he is led through the city disguised as a woman” (Eur. *Bacc.* 722-723). Making Pentheus cross-dress must have more implications than simply to arouse the maenads to murder him: it is also, in the mind of Dionysus and, tangentially, of the playwright, an intentional prank, a way to diminish Pentheus in the eyes of his people.

Pentheus’ costume change personified the abnormal role into which he had fallen, one completely distinct from the gender normative role which he had filled up to that point. In fact, as soon as Pentheus has been put in women’s clothing, he becomes obsessed with how he looks and how he fulfills his now feminine role.<sup>23</sup> He says:

“But how do I look? Isn’t the way I stand just like Ino, my aunt, or my mother Agave? ... I must have thrown [my hair] out of place when I was dancing as a bacchant inside the palace, shaking my head up and down” (Eur. *Bacc.* 783-788).

This sudden change in attitude at a change of apparel is notable not only because it shows Pentheus expressing the same vain and excessive behavior of which he accused Dionysus earlier, but also that, in accepting this feminine role, he becomes friendly and accepting of the foreigner’s presence. As Zeitlin notes, at this change, Pentheus opens himself up to Dionysus even to physical contact, becoming passive to someone whom he had accused of being soft before.<sup>24</sup> This would imply a major deficiency on Pentheus’ part, demoting him to the effeminate role to which he had relegated Dionysus earlier on in the play.

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<sup>23</sup> Ormand 2003, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Zeitlin 1985, 71.

An interesting parallel to this scene, and one which differs very much in tone, comes from the beginning of the play, wherein two old men, Pentheus' grandfather, Cadmus, and the blind seer, Tiresias, are seen dressed as bacchants. Dancing around, they are preparing to go out of the town to worship this new god for whom the women of Thebes have left already (Eur. *Bacc.* 156-165). This scene is both comical and informative, as it shows that men in Thebes were also worshipping the god at this time, though they had not been taken up in madness as the women had.<sup>25</sup> The comedy of this scene, however, comes not from their outfits so much as their age, which is repeatedly stated for the amusement of the audience (Eur. *Bacc.* 152-6, 171-5, 202-6, 288). Old age was a common trope for ridicule in Classical Greek comedies, in which old men or women would do something ridiculous or out of character, often driving the story in some way because of it.<sup>26</sup> In this case, the actions of the old men drive the young king, Pentheus, into a foul mood which fuels his abuse of Dionysus shortly thereafter.

When Pentheus arrives in the play, he admonishes his grandfather for dressing up as a bacchant, stating that his actions are not proper for his age, and by the old men's own words, this seems to be true (Eur. *Bacc.* 202-6). However, their transgression lies in crossing the boundaries of age propriety, not gender propriety. Because their transgression is offensive to some but still follows proper ritual practice, their actions display clearly to the audience that while worshipping the god in a way which might shame oneself or bring on ridicule is not necessarily bad, to do so against the god and against one's own gender is clearly circumspect, as for Pentheus, these actions bring death.

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<sup>25</sup> Oranje believes that this is notable, both because it means that not all of Thebes is as against the new god as Pentheus, and because it shows that the god has been acknowledged without the coercion that was necessary for his maenads (1984, 38).

<sup>26</sup> Dover discusses the ways in which beliefs about old men's inability to perform certain duties in the Classical world was paralleled in the conventions portraying them in drama by assessing the character of Philokleon in Aristophanes' *Wasps* (1972, 128-9).

In the end, Pentheus' destruction was brought on by three forces: the machinations of Dionysus, his own ego, and his disguise. Although one could blame all of what befell Pentheus on his own need to see the maenads and his arrogant belief that he would not be caught, the disguise did play a large role, not only in humiliating the king, but also in his ultimate demise. By dressing as a woman, Pentheus left himself open to attack both socially and physically, as when Dionysus called to his maenads that a man was among them in disguise, he could not defend himself in any way (Eur. *Bacc.* 926-930). Beyond the madness and power of the maenads given to them by the god, their anger at a man infiltrating their worship must also have been great, as the Chorus attests in lines 878-880:

“Go, Bacchus, and with a smile on your face  
Cast your net around this man who hunts bacchants,  
So that he will fall under the deadly herd of maenads!”

Furthermore, although he could have been killed without dressing like a woman, Dionysus viewed it as an ultimate humiliation to do so in this way, as it showed the de-masculinization of Pentheus at the hands of the god, and also at the hands of his own lust. This aspect of Pentheus' character, his lustful obsession, has been an important part of the discourse concerning Pentheus in the past, and should not be overlooked here. In fact, Oranje argues that Pentheus was so overcome by his lust-induced need to watch the maenads that he succumbed to the god's plan with very little effort on the part of Dionysus, despite the madness inflicted upon him.<sup>27</sup> This seemingly effortless fall into madness would have been seen as a feminine trait by the Greeks, as women were thought to have less control over their emotional responses than men.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, Pentheus' change into an effeminate character makes his demise at the end of the play inevitable.

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<sup>27</sup> Oranje 1984, 83-4.

<sup>28</sup> Powers 2014, 58.

Euripides' *Bacchae* is extremely helpful when exploring ancient views on gender transgression, especially cross-dressing, because it reveals the reactions of men like Pentheus and what they expect from society. One can learn then what societal norms may have been when it came to cross-dressing in the ancient world. However, one cannot make this case from one play alone. Furthermore, the *Bacchae* is the only tragedy surviving with cross-dressing as a major plot point, which makes verifying and seconding the beliefs expressed within it difficult. To attempt to combat this problem and to explore how cross-dressing was handled by comic poets during the 5<sup>th</sup> century, two plays by Aristophanes will be examined next.

### **Comedy's Perspective: Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Ecclesiazusae***

A younger contemporary of Euripides, Aristophanes wrote comedies during the late 5<sup>th</sup> into the early 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. These plays include both absurd fantasies and political commentaries, which he wrote until his death in ca. 385 BCE. His first play was produced in 427 BCE, and eleven of his plays survive today. Henderson takes particular note of the satirical, political motivations behind many of Aristophanes' works.<sup>29</sup> However, there is a problem in studying the motivations of comedy which is hard to bypass: the tradition within the comedic genre of overemphasizing something to the point of absurdity. This can make drawing truth from the text more difficult than from a tragedy, which utilizes character tropes and themes that were more common in daily life, or derived from common myths. Nonetheless, some truth may be drawn from comedies by taking the characters' reactions to these extreme conditions as honest reflections of what Greek society might have thought of them.

The *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Ecclesiazusae* are both indicative of Aristophanes' habit of rendering a world in which the normal system of governance or belief has been inverted, often

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<sup>29</sup> Henderson 2010, 12-13.

with women taking a dominant role.<sup>30</sup> Plays like the *Lysistrata* are especially well-known for this, but the aforementioned two have been chosen instead because they both employ cross-dressing as a plot device. The *Thesmophoriazusae* was produced first, around 411 BCE, with the *Ecclesiazusae* following nearly twenty years later.<sup>31</sup>

The *Thesmophoriazusae* is the story of Euripides and one of his kinsmen as they attempt to infiltrate the sacred festival only for women known as the Thesmophoria. This is done by dressing Kinsman as a woman, after Euripides' first idea, of employing the effeminate male, Agathon, fails. They do this because Euripides fears the hatred incurred by his plays' honest and vitriolic representations of women. Specifically, he is worried that it might cause the women to act against him in some way, and so he persuades his kinsman to sneak into the festival and influence the women's beliefs about Euripides for the better. However, in doing so, turmoil follows and they find themselves in the midst of a meeting of women just as chaotic as they had imagined. This play's opening sequence is humorous but also notable for the ways in which Kinsman deals with his disguise and with the character of Agathon.

The cross-dressing scene in the opening of the *Thesmophoriazusae* has a few similarities with that of the *Bacchae*, not the least of which being the banter between the one dressing and the one being dressed. However, while in the *Bacchae* this dialogue was sinister and foreshadowing, with Pentheus coming nearer to his doom, in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, the atmosphere is much lighter and comical, as when Kinsman complains while he is having his bottom scorched of hair, "How am I supposed to be brave when I'm being turbo-vulcanized?" (Arist. *Thes.* 277). Still, there are some similarities to the *Bacchae*'s cross-dressing scene. For example, as Euripides' kinsman gets his beard shaved, he acts nearly as Pentheus does, at one

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<sup>30</sup> Zeitlin 1996, 375.

<sup>31</sup> It is important to note as well that the *Thesmophoriazusae* includes the playwright Euripides as a character, and that some of the themes and scenes within it may have directly influenced the writing of *Bacchae*.

moment stouthearted and sure in his actions, in the next, running away until he can be persuaded to return (Arist. *Thes.* 236-249).<sup>32</sup> However, Kinsman continues in the charade because of his bond with Euripides and for the sake of the plot.

One remarkable difference between Pentheus and Kinsman is the way in which they choose to embrace their disguises. For though Pentheus begins to preen and ask after the accuracy and femininity of his disguise as soon as it is on (Eur. *Bacc.* 784-790), Kinsman appears to be comically masculine under the women's clothing he dons. As Euripides notes, Kinsman's words and actions show that he is a man even under his disguise (Arist. *Thes.* 304-5). Eva Stehle explains the difficulty of understanding the transgression of characters in the *Thesmophoriazusae* thus:

“As for gender representation in the play, most analysis holds that men prevail. Different commentators take Aristophanes to be revealing that women on stage are all really men, or questioning what a woman really is since she is the very figure of mimesis, or showing that women deserve the reputation that Euripides gives them. Even though Inlaw [Kinsman] and Euripides must play female figures as punishment for exposing women's transgressions, most agree that their masculinity never comes into question”.<sup>33</sup>

This lack of femininity taken on in spite of an acknowledged transgression makes it difficult to examine Kinsman's role in the plot, as it goes against the norm exhibited elsewhere, that those who transgress are altered because of this fault, whether in the eyes of society or in their own actions. Kinsman becomes especially problematic toward the end of the play, when he has been captured by a policeman and takes on the role of female and male characters from Euripides' plays in his attempts to escape, switching between genders with no obvious discomfort on his part (1030-1186).<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, since Kinsman is doing all of this in a mock-play, with Euripides as a constant reminder of the dramatic allusions taking place, this section may be

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<sup>32</sup> This and all subsequent line citations of Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* are from Henderson 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Stehle 2002, 371.

<sup>34</sup> Zeitlin 1996, 311.

acknowledging the fringe role that actors play in taking on female parts without compromising their identity.<sup>35</sup>

Aristophanes, though he alters conventions for comedic effect in some plays, nevertheless makes clear what female and male roles are. For example, in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, outward representations of female gender expression are shown in Kinsman's cross-dressing scene's removal of hair (Arist. *Thes.* 234-278), donning of more decorative, feminine clothing (Arist. *Thes.* 288-291), and affectation of a feminine voice (Arist. *Thes.* 304-5). Furthermore, the plot displays the standard in which women would be confined to their homes while men conducted business by utilizing the Thesmophoria as a framework, a time in which these roles are temporarily reversed.<sup>36</sup> Finally, the *Thesmophoriazusae* showcases the expectation that women are naturally promiscuous when lacking proper masculine control, as Kinsman's speech at the Thesmophoria reveals his beliefs about the women's true moral character (Arist. *Thes.* 475-490).<sup>37</sup> It would be uncharacteristic of Aristophanes to have Kinsman transgressing so obviously while maintaining a masculine demeanor without some indication of how this might occur, since he commonly alludes to the importance of maintaining social norms in this way.<sup>38</sup> It is helpful, then, that there is one character in the *Thesmophoriazusae* for whom a feminine costume is equal to a feminine position: Agathon.

Agathon plays an interesting role in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, being both the model for Kinsman's disguise and the conspirator of Euripides and Kinsman, albeit unwillingly. Yet Agathon's only role in the beginning of the play is as someone to whom Euripides comes for

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<sup>35</sup> Zeitlin argues that Aristophanes may also be playing on the ineffectiveness of Euripides' plays, and of tragedy in general, because Euripides and Kinsman were unable to convince the Policeman of the fictitious characters' sincerity until they utilized a comedic convention, that of employing the slave girl as a decoy (1996, 312).

<sup>36</sup> Henderson 2010, 96.

<sup>37</sup> The *Ecclesiazusae* will continue in this expectation, to greater effect.

<sup>38</sup> Dover 1972, 227-9.

help, and from whom he receives the disguise for Kinsman. He offers no advice on dressing the man as a woman, and does not actively seek them out, but is wheeled back into his home as soon as his job on-stage is done. Therefore one must wonder what his role is in this scene. On the one hand, Agathon was not, like Dionysus, an instigator for this action, nor was he against it in any way. Instead, he seemed to be passively accepting the orders of Euripides and Kinsman, giving them what they needed, even as he was insinuated to do sexually with other males.<sup>39</sup> And this very insinuation appears to be his reason for inclusion in the play. Agathon was known in the Classical Greek World, having been mentioned in other sources, such as Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>40</sup> But while Euripides, also a real individual and a playwright, was shown in this play for the sake of a rivalry between his works and Aristophanes', Agathon has no connection to the plot beyond this original incident. In some ways, Agathon could be acting as a foil to Kinsman's resilient masculinity, a passive man, possibly even a *kinaidos*, a gender transgressive male in the Classical Greek world who was taunted and even feared for the break in the balance of normative gender roles which he represented.<sup>41</sup> It seems, then, that Aristophanes is using him as an object for the audience to marvel at or criticize at their own convenience, a reference to an individual which his audience would know, one who takes on a feminine role to such a degree that it becomes obscene.

Indeed, as Euripides' kinsman notes to him, Agathon lacks both manliness and womanliness combined (Arist. *Thes.* 161-5).<sup>42</sup> Agathon is shown then not as one becoming a woman in all respects, but as a male corrupted by femininity into something lesser than both and

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<sup>39</sup> Ormand notes that Agathon may have been seen as a *kinaidos*, or a passively sexual male (2003, 26). However, McClure argues that he is here depicted as a male prostitute. It is possible, of course, that both are correct (1999, 220).

<sup>40</sup> In which he argues that the nature of Love lies in its Beauty rather than in how—or whom—it encompasses (Plat. *Sym.* 197a-e).

<sup>41</sup> Ormand 2003, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Stehle comments on this that the actor portraying Agathon may be literally lacking both the comedic phallus of a male character and the breasts of a woman, an outward sign of his confusing status (2002, 379-84).



used by all. In the play, Agathon justifies his mode of dress by stating that he takes on the state of dress and speech of a woman in order to better evoke them in his work (Arist. *Thes.* 171-2). Euripides, too, states that he acted in a similar fashion earlier on in his writing career (Arist. *Thes.* 186-7). And so the character of Agathon must be seen as something apart from merely a joke at the male who has gone too far into femininity. Instead, his inclusion may be another example of Aristophanes poking fun at dramatic conventions, and at other playwrights in general, as this play does quite mercilessly with Euripides.<sup>43</sup>

It is also important to examine the ways in which Aristophanes is playing off of the natural role reversal present in the Thesmophoria. The Thesmophoria was meant to be a time when women could meet and perform rituals while men stayed at home, allowed for because of its ritual significance even as it discomfited the men left behind.<sup>44</sup> This discomfiture can be seen in the ways that Aristophanes chooses to represent the women participating in the Thesmophoria. As his paranoia about the idea of unsupervised women comes through, much like Pentheus in the *Bacchae*, the characters in *Thesmophoriazusae* expect the worst. In this case, they get it. The women participating in the Thesmophoria are drinking, talking about cheating on their husbands, conducting a mock-assembly meeting in which they make decisions about how to deal with the plays which they believe are slandering the women of the *polis* (395-450). More than even their moral ambiguities, by taking on the traditionally masculine role of making an assembly to determine punishments for a private citizen, the women at the Thesmophoria are clearly transgressing in a way which unsettles Kinsman greatly.

The *Thesmophoriazusae* provides an interesting counterpoint to the *Bacchae*. While containing similar themes, the *Thesmophoriazusae* brings it into a “modern” context, showing

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<sup>43</sup> Ormand 2003, 27.

<sup>44</sup> Henderson 2010, 96.

individuals who were alive in Athens at the time it was written, and not mythical kings. Furthermore, it strengthens the ideas considered in the *Bacchae*, that those who willingly break gender and ritual norms must be punished in some way. For when Kinsman is finally discovered at the Thesmophoria, he is held by the character of the Policeman, left in women's clothes for all to see, and mocked both by his guard and the women who captured him. This scene shows the fears that Pentheus felt in the *Bacchae*, a male paranoia of being seen as womanly by one's peers. The play may function as a criticism of female behavior and a view of what men feared women did, as Kinsman shows when he gets to the Thesmophoria. Moreover, it is also a glimpse into what men fear for themselves if they are perceived to fill a female role. Still, it is important to note that in the midst of this criticism of social and dramatic rules, none of the characters ever criticize the festival or the rites attached to it, only the morals and character of the women participating and the men infiltrating it.

Another play by Aristophanes, the *Ecclesiazusae* takes a slightly different approach to cross-dressing. Rather than following the same trope of men hiding among women until they are found out and put in danger, it is a case of women dressing as men. The impetus for this is interesting as well, for though the last two examples were due to a need to see what the women were doing, particularly in a ritual context, in this play, the women already know what the men are doing- they just think that they can do a better job. Their wish is to completely overthrow the power of the men by taking part in government in their place. Under the rule of a leading woman named Praxagora, this plan works. However, in the course of these actions, the women create a world which, for the men, can only be seen as cruel and unreasonable.

The *Ecclesiazusae* opens with Praxagora, one of the women who has planned this government takeover, awaiting her conspirators' arrival with their disguises so they might go to

the Assembly and vote on measures to be taken up in the *polis*. The meeting is notable both as a means of exploring the character of Praxagora, and in seeing how she differs from some of the more traditional women around her. The most striking difference is the ability with which Praxagora gives her practice speech to the women in place of the Assembly, an ability picked up, Praxagora states, when she was living with her husband on the Pnyx, where the Assembly met (Arist. *Eccl.* 243-4). The other women, however, continually blunder in their speeches, not understanding the method by which the Assembly is run or how to speak as men do (Arist. *Eccl.* 131-160).<sup>45</sup> As one woman in the group asks, “how will a ‘feminine-minded company of women’ be able to make public speeches?” (Arist. *Eccl.* 110-1).<sup>46</sup> One woman in the group even asks to bring along her equipment for carding wool, so that she might fulfill part of her womanly duties while hiding among the men (Arist. *Eccl.* 88-89).<sup>47</sup> It is interesting, however, that though the meekness of the women as a whole and their unwillingness to transgress normative gender roles is emphasized, they are shown to follow their strong and relatively revolutionary leader, Praxagora, without much thought for the repercussions. This is especially evident when the women’s motivations are examined, as instead of a large-scale attempt to save the city, as might be expected for such a coup, their motivations appear to be rather personal and petty. For though the city seems to be in some kind of trouble, it is economic and personal in nature, something that threatens morals rather than lives.

For the most part, the women in the *Ecclesiazusae* are of one mind. Although some are given titles, such as First and Second Woman, they are nonetheless so similar to those who speak

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<sup>45</sup> McClure talks in-depth about women's inability to adopt masculine speech patterns (1999, 242-6).

<sup>46</sup> This and all subsequent translations and line numbers for Aristophanes’ *Ecclesiazusae* are from Sommerstein 1998.

<sup>47</sup> It is also noted by Ormand that the practice of “carding wool” may have been a euphemism for female masturbation, in which case this is not a scene making fun of a woman’s compulsion to “work the wool,” but is rather a reference to women’s uncontrollable sexual urges, a theme which becomes especially important toward the end of the play (2003, 25).

in the Chorus that they are nearly indistinguishable from these, and from one another. What is interesting about them is their involvement in the planning with Praxagora. For, as Henderson notes in his introduction to the text, the women of the *Ecclesiazusae* are notable because of their contributions in the plot to take part in the city.<sup>48</sup> In fact, Praxagora was not even chosen to speak in front of the Assembly until the day in which it was held. Furthermore, while one might assume that dressing as men would be as detestable to the women as it was, in reverse, for characters like Pentheus or Kinsman, the women actually seem enthused by their disguises, one woman boasting:

“The first thing I did was throw my razor out of the house, so that I would get hairy all over and not look like a woman at all anymore” (Arist. *Eccl.* 65-66).

The idea of body hair as a factor in gender expression was clearly significant in Greek culture at the time, as Kinsman’s ordeal with being shaved in the *Thesmophoriazusae* expressed as well. It is difficult to ascertain what Aristophanes was trying to show through these women, since the characters depicted in the *Ecclesiazusae* are hesitant to give up normative household roles, and yet have no issue taking up masculine disguises.<sup>49</sup> For although Praxagora reprimanded the others for breaking character in their practice speeches (Arist. *Eccl.* 134-6, 156-160), they did not seem to be holding the same fear and shameful attitudes that Pentheus or Kinsman did in their disguises. This could mean that, for a woman, the punishment might be less for a transgression of this sort and the shame more tolerable. It appears more likely, however, that many of the women in the *Ecclesiazusae* simply do not understand the severity of what they are undertaking. The flippant comments that the women use to refer to what amounts to a coup of normal

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<sup>48</sup> Henderson 2010, 150.

<sup>49</sup> Ormand argues that, both in the *Ecclesiazusae* and in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, Aristophanes is reinforcing normative gender roles by showing how incapable the sex are in roles not their own (2003, 24). Though this does not account for the relative comfort of the women in dressing as men in relation to the very disturbed attitudes of the men made to dress as women, it is nonetheless reinforced by the actions and beliefs of those in the plays.

government practices demonstrates their ignorance of how serious it is, with only Praxagora, the one among them with experience listening to the speeches given at the Assembly, showing caution in her actions.

What exactly occurs at the assembly isn't shown in the play, but it is relayed to Praxagora's husband that the women's plans have gone through, and that the entire city is now in their care (Arist. *Eccl.* 377-477). However, while some of the economic choices the women make appear to be in the best interests of the city, the comedic tone of the play comes through in the sexual aspect of their laws: namely, that any man may be with any woman, so long as he has intercourse with uglier woman first (Arist. *Eccl.* 717-721). The law forcing men to have sex with uglier women before more attractive ones seems to follow all of the other statutes instituted by the women, with the goals of total selflessness and the benefit of the entire community being emphasized. Nevertheless, it stands out as the only law which benefits women above men in nearly every case, and becomes a major conflict within the plot for the last half of the play.<sup>50</sup>

The implied sexual deviancy of women is evident, through the law mentioned above and in the violence with which the characters pursue sexual gratification in the *Ecclesiazusae*. As Cartledge has noted, Aristophanes "extend[s] the notion of female sexual initiative to the point of grotesque caricature" in this play, by showing that women, when given the power, would compel men to have intercourse with them.<sup>51</sup> This idea, that women have an uncontrollable desire for sex, or that they have this tendency, was far from rare in this period. This theme is also taken up in Sophocles' *Trachinae*, in which Heracles' wife, Deianeira, kills her husband out of a need for

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<sup>50</sup> This law does not benefit all women, however. Some of the younger, more beautiful women are left open to abuse because of it, and though they would only have to face it when the older women had been pleased first, it is clear that this plan did not benefit all as well as it did the older women who infiltrated the Assembly in the first place.

<sup>51</sup> Cartledge 1990, 41.

him to find her sexually alluring and through a lack of knowledge about the things she does.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, in the *Bacchae*, the young king Pentheus is also worried about the unsupervised actions of the women out in the countryside, assuming that they must be performing lewd acts (Arist. *Eccl.* 185-191). It makes sense, then, that Aristophanes would call upon this well-known weakness in the opposite sex as a fatal flaw in their ability to govern.

However, if this were the only problem in the play, it would follow that the only deficiency the women possess is that they are women, and subject to womanly passions. Under this assumption, the act of cross-dressing would appear to have no bad consequences for women, though for men it has been shown to be disastrous. It is true that, while transgressions on the part of males have been punished for the implied deficiency of being seen as feminine, the same would not be able to apply for women. However, that does not mean that the transgression itself is not worthy of offense. By stealing the cloaks of their husbands and leaving behind their own clothes, some scholars have argued that the women of the *Ecclesiazusae* would be viewed as taking away the masculinity of their partners, even as they took away their public positions and votes.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, in lines 535-537, Blepyrus seems to be accusing his wife of “mugging” him and planting her own himation over his body, so that he would be forced into the clothing of a woman.<sup>54</sup> It is interesting that by taking Blepyrus’ masculine role in government, Praxagora was relegating him to a feminine role at home, just as was done with their clothing.<sup>55</sup> Seen in this

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<sup>52</sup> Foley argues that Deianeira’s actions are ultimately Heracles’ fault, for leaving her unsupervised and then awakening her sexual jealousy by introducing a rival love interest into their household (2001, 95).

<sup>53</sup> Compton-Engle takes this approach to create a statement on both economics and gender roles, bridging the gap between Aristophanes’ earlier, more gender-centric plays, like *Lysistrata*, and his later, more economy-focused ones, like *Wealth* (2005, 167).

<sup>54</sup> Compton-Engle 2005, 168.

<sup>55</sup> For the importance of gender stability for participation in government, see Aeschines’ *Against Timarchus*, a political persecution on the part of Aeschines, a defense for himself through the slandering of a lesser-known politician at the time, Timarchus. In this speech, Aeschines hopes to completely discredit Timarchus as a public speaker by criticizing his actions as a youth, implying that he was at one time a prostitute, and that, from this, he should not be allowed to participate in government nor be a citizen any longer.

light, it appears that the women, far from being elevated in status by taking on the preferable traits of males, are instead harming their reputations by taking that which is not theirs and using it to further their own very feminine needs: specifically, that of sexual gratification.

Aristophanes has been known for making political arguments in his plays and for hyperbolizing real-life characters to suit his dramatic satire.<sup>56</sup> However, even taking into account the latter of these two facets of Aristophanes' writing, his plays were not by any means completely ridiculous. Rather, like comedies today, Aristophanes could be read either as a wholly serious political commentary or as a wholly comedic reversal of norms, depending on the audience.<sup>57</sup> Plays like the *Thesmophoriazousae* and the *Ecclesiazusae* both epitomize this Aristophanic type, the former criticizing both the actions of women left to their own devices and the works of tragic playwrights like Euripides, and the latter calling into question the security of the Athenian government as well as the security of a man's gender propriety. Because of this variety of interpretations for the plays of Aristophanes, they can be used to explore both social norms and social deviancy, making them undeniably suitable for the study of gender transgression.

### **Less Transgressive Tragedies: Sophocles' *Trachinae* and Euripides' *Hippolytus***

Two additional plays will be examined in this section, which show characters who do not physically transgress by cross-dressing, but metaphorically. The first is the *Trachinae*, a tragedy by the Classical playwright Sophocles, who wrote in the 5th century BCE, and the other is the *Hippolytus*, a tragedy by Euripides. Both of these plays contain instances of characters who

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<sup>56</sup>For a good example of the political satire of Aristophanes, see the *Knights*, and for hyperbolized characters, see the *Clouds*, which addresses the philosopher Socrates in such a way that it may have contributed in his famous trial's guilty verdict.

<sup>57</sup>Cartledge makes the argument that Aristophanes' comedies may be vague enough in some respects to be appreciated no matter the audience, in whatever way they wish to read into its themes (1990, 45-6).

transgress normative gender roles because of sexual impulses, and both show how, even when transgression is not taken as far as cross-dressing, it can still be fatal for all of those involved.

The *Trachinae* was produced by Sophocles, and relates the story of Heracles as he finally returns home to his wife after completing his heroic labors. However, though Heracles' wife, Deianeira, has been watching over his household and keeping everything in order while he was away, she is upset at the arrival of a certain young woman among Heracles' conquests (Soph. *Trach.* 335-74), and this distress eventually leads to a desperate game for Heracles' heart. In the end, Deianeira kills Heracles through her jealousy and ignorance, and kills herself for her folly before Heracles has even died.

The problems arising in this play are unequivocally those of sex and gender, but why they happened as they did is a matter of debate. On the one hand, the conflict centers on the two women, both desired by Heracles at one time or another, but one now neglected for the other in both physical and social matters. On the other hand, the conflict centers solely on the wife, Deianeira, who has been left alone for so long and no longer understands where her boundaries as a proper wife should lie, as she feels threatened by the new girl, Iole.<sup>58</sup> And finally, the conflict arises from a very Sophoclean source: prophecies. For as Heracles notes at the end of the play:

“My father told me long ago  
that no living man should kill me,  
but that someone from hell would, and  
that brute of a Centaur has done it.  
The dead beast kills the living me” (Soph. *Trach.* 1159-63).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Levett adds that not only is Deianeira threatened by Iole as a sexual rival, but even as a potential new wife for Heracles, as Heracles sets the new girl above a slave, in the status of concubine, which he cites as a position with unclear boundaries in the *oikos* (2004, 50-1).

<sup>59</sup> All translations and citations of Sophocles' *Trachinae* are taken from the translation by Pound 1957.



Still, though the conflicts present are varied and complex, they all focus on the same two people: Heracles and Deianeira.<sup>60</sup>

Heracles and Deianeira both play important roles in the outcome of the *Trachinae*, Deianeira being the driving force of the action and the main actor in the beginning of the play, Heracles giving voice to the truth of the matter at the end and bringing in Iole, the one who triggered Deianeira's jealousy. Heracles could be at fault for the entire situation, for going after Iole so far as to sack her city to win her, and in leaving her in the care of his wife, who he had been neglecting for years.<sup>61</sup> In this way, Heracles is reminiscent of the young king Pentheus, who forsook propriety and caution for the sake of his lust.<sup>62</sup> Heracles is clearly transgressing his role as a man and as a hero in the beginning of the play, as he is allowing himself to be controlled by a desire for Iole, and at the end of the play, through his suffering.<sup>63</sup> Lichias, trying to justify his master's actions, says it is merely Heracles' nature that he should be overpowered by love (Soph. *Trach.* 488). Surely, the bestial and often upsetting nature of Heracles should not be overlooked, for he was an upsetting figure even for the Greeks, since his actions did not always fit with what they thought to be proper behavior.<sup>64</sup> In this play and in others, Heracles is often depicted as one not controlled by the social norms that constrain the actions of most other Greek citizens, acting

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<sup>60</sup> Though Iole is at the center of this conflict as well, she does not speak for herself or work for or against any of the other characters in this play, and so has no purpose except as an object of desire for Heracles.

<sup>61</sup> Levett notes this take on Heracles when he mentions Lichias' argument in lines 250-251, that Heracles is enslaved in lust and therefore not responsible for his shameful actions; however, in stating that these actions should be considered shameful under other circumstances, Lichias reveals to the audience that what Heracles is doing is fundamentally wrong (2004, 58).

<sup>62</sup> Cawthorn also draws this comparison, but more strongly, arguing that Sophocles and Euripides alike forced their heroes into a feminine role in order to destroy them, to show that only the gods can perform this transformation and survive (2008, 120-2).

<sup>63</sup> Cawthorn, argues that Heracles' suffering makes him into a feminine figure, drawing relations between the cloth covering his wounds and a bridal veil, as the Greek words for each are similar (2008, 64). However, though the view of Heracles being the bride in place of his wife who has taken control of his situation, and his life, would fit the mold of the other plays which have been discussed here, it would also be possible to view this as a reference to his lowly nature as a human, in comparison to the gods, which he will join after his suffering, the "marriage" of his human and godly traits, is complete.

<sup>64</sup> Cawthorn 2008, 63.

crude, crass, and drunken for comedic effect on multiple occasions.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, though Heracles is not completely in the right in these circumstances, he was not the only character who transgressed traditional gender roles in the *Trachinae*.

Deianeira is an exceptional example of a transgressive female character, since she has a positive background to contrast with the horrific outcomes of her transgression. She was taken from her people and made to marry Heracles at a young age, and acted as a dutiful wife for the majority of her life. However, due to the heroic duties Heracles takes up, especially toward the end of his life, Deianeira is left alone to take care of his household and do as she will, leading her to make mistakes which wives with more traditional husbands might not face.<sup>66</sup> From her history of repression from sexual activity, as Deianeira was shown to have never taken another lover, coupled with a relatively free home life while Heracles was away, Deianeira typified the ways in which a traditional Greek wife might be corrupted due to the incompetency of her husband.<sup>67</sup> Griffith named Deianeira among a list containing the likes of Medea and Phaedra (from Eur. *Hipp.*), as an example of the indecisive villain: a woman who wishes to do something that she knows is wrong out of desperation alone.<sup>68</sup> Deianeira distinguishes herself from other masculinized women in her hesitiation, addressing the Chorus of women and asking them if what she plans is right (Soph. *Trach.* 585-7). This need for validation or direction of some kind shows the sympathetic side of Deianeira, as she knows that she does not understand what she is doing, and yet she continues out of concern for herself and her family.

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<sup>65</sup> See Euripides' *Alceste*, in which Heracles shows up in the middle of funeral rites for his guest-friend's wife, and cavorts about, loud and drunken, for a large portion of the play.

<sup>66</sup> Foley also explores the anxieties of Deianeira and the repulsive nature of Heracles (2001, 95-6).

<sup>67</sup> Foley draws a comparison between Deianeira and Clytemnestra, who were both wronged by their husbands and criticized their husbands for attempting to bring a concubine into their home when they already had wives (2001, 214-5). Although the actions of Clytemnestra and Deianeira do not overlap in purpose, the similarities are nonetheless striking.

<sup>68</sup> Griffith 2001, 125.

Because of her sexually inhibited nature and the way in which she regards Heracles as her property, despite his repeated affairs (Soph. *Trach.* 460-2), Deianeira also brings to mind the sex-crazed women of the *Ecclesiazusae*. However, the sexual nature of women which the *Thesmophoriazusae* and the *Ecclesiazusae* hyperbolize, the *Trachinae* seems to accept in a more toned down way. For much of the talk concerning both Iole's sexual appeal and references to Deianeira's obsession with Heracles are done through metaphor, evading the acts themselves but hinting at a "sickness" Heracles has for women, similar to but more offensive than the single-minded devotion Deianeira has for him (Soph. *Trach.* 130-111, 365-8, 537-44). It is this very devotion which makes Deianeira into such a dangerous woman. For when Iole comes into her home, Deianeira feels threatened, not only as a lover but as a wife. Levett goes so far as to suggest that Iole's power over Heracles ensures that she will become an important figure in the household, more than a concubine alone but like a second wife, something which, as in Euripides' *Medea*, the audience would recognize as both illegal and a threat to Heracles' well-being.<sup>69</sup> Deianeira's transgression into a position of power over her husband, including the power of witchcraft, might indeed invoke the myth of Medea to the *Trachinae*'s audience, and in doing so, make Deianeira into a less sympathetic character than in the beginning of the play, when she was shown to be the dutiful and ever-patient wife. Thus, Deianeira's transformation becomes complete, on account of both her lust and her obsession with power in her relationship, both of which she was not due as a properly feminine wife.

The *Trachinae* can show much about the expectations of husbands and wives in ancient Greek society, but it can also show the ways in which these lines are easily crossed. Although the plays of Aristophanes show the fears of men amplified, with women forcing sexual encounters over men in a society turned on its head, Sophocles shows what men truly feared. They were

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<sup>69</sup> Levett 2004, 51.

worried that their women, in a jealous and lust-filled desperation, might cause their husbands distress by meddling where they had no knowledge. Though Deianeira kills herself for her transgressions and for her ignorance, the one who truly suffers in this play is Heracles. His death is drawn out, gruesome, and extremely painful. Amidst his distress, Deianeira is forgotten, her place in the play finished. Therefore, one must be careful when determining how the *Trachinae* assesses gender transgression, for both men and women. For though it was Deianeira who used the poison on Heracles, it was Heracles who left Deianeira to become the independent and single-minded woman she became, who instilled in her the longing which became concentrated in time, and who introduced a wife-like rival into their already fragile household. In doing this, Heracles brought on the fate that would be his, the death which, though his audience knew it ended in divinity, was no less painful to watch. The fact that his fate was brought on by the use of clothing, and that this clothing conveyed a feminine meaning in his suffering, can only have added to the hero's shame, which must have been the greatest before his glory became immortal.

On the opposite side of the spectrum from Heracles, the hyper-masculine hero, there is another kind of transgressor who ought to be acknowledged for the sake of inclusiveness: Hippolytus. The *Hippolytus*, a play by Euripides, is about the fragile balance between Aphrodite and Artemis, and what results when one is given more attention than the other.<sup>70</sup> It follows Hippolytus, a young man who has angered Aphrodite by ignoring her in his life both by remaining a virgin and by ignoring her in ritual matters, choosing instead to devote himself entirely to the goddess of the hunt, Artemis. Opposite him is the character of Phaedra, Hippolytus' step-mother, who is enveloped by lust for Hippolytus beyond her control. Due to the machinations of Phaedra's Nurse and the unhappy Aphrodite, both Hippolytus and Phaedra end up meeting their demise.

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<sup>70</sup> Ferguson 1972, 279-80.

The *Hippolytus* is different from past plays discussed here because of the way in which Hippolytus' transgression is expressed. For rather than distorting the role of a proper Greek male through clothing, suffering, or sexual excess, Hippolytus does so by extreme self-denial. In particular, he denies himself sexual encounters of any kind, to the point where he feels offended by the touch of someone of the opposite sex (Eur. *Hipp.* 913-4). Being a young man, his denial of sex is out of place, as Theseus' speech later suggests (Eur. *Hipp.* 1473-8), since there was no stigma to sexual exploits for a young man in Classical Greece, so long as one avoided affairs or marrying a slave, a circumstance played off by comedy as a relatively common circumstance, though this was likely not the case.<sup>71</sup> Most interestingly, however, is the fact that Hippolytus believes that all he is doing is correct and in line with the moral idea of *sophrosyne*, or moderation and self-restraint (Eur. *Hipp.* 157-9). This is belied by his actions, however. For although Hippolytus preaches his goodness and purity by merit of moderation, he acts with such aversion of Aphrodite, and women in general, that it becomes clear to the audience that his true thoughts on the matter are of fear rather than prudence.<sup>72</sup>

Hippolytus displays behaviors which go against traditional male roles in Greek society by discarding sexual needs for the sake of his self-professed *sophrosyne*, but he discards his masculine role in other ways as well. As Cawthorn notes, by following the goddess Artemis and choosing to stay in the mountains and hunt, Hippolytus has thrown away his heroic, masculine self-worth in not pursuing the glory of war.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, his fear of women has given them a power over him, more even than his beloved goddess Artemis, for whom Hippolytus holds the highest esteem (Eur. *Hipp.* 105-124). Hippolytus is not wholly exceptional in his de-masculinization, however. Like Heracles in the *Trachinae*, Hippolytus also undergoes a deep and

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<sup>71</sup> Lape and Moreno 2014, 359.

<sup>72</sup> Ferguson 1972, 281.

<sup>73</sup> Cawthorn 2008, 89.

weakening suffering at a drawn-out death (Eur. *Hipp.* 2036-2077).<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Heracles and Hippolytus share in their pain in more ways than one, as both have been cursed by women who long for them. Their difference comes in the ways in which they warranted their fates, Heracles by chasing *eros* too far, Hippolytus by denying it in all things.

Phaedra's transgressions are recognizable as well, though they don't manifest of her own will. Phaedra oversteps her place in her uncontrollable lust for Hippolytus, one which has brought her down into a state near death, wasted away through love and a reluctance to defy custom by sleeping with her step-son. The audience hears in the beginning of the play that this lust is not her own, but one placed by Aphrodite to ensnare Hippolytus (Eur. *Hipp.* 40-47). However, any adultery Phaedra might have committed was made impossible through Hippolytus' relentless virginity and through her own will. For despite her "disease," Phaedra continually hides her passion from others, albeit badly (Eur. *Hipp.* 533-539). Thus, Phaedra is a very different woman from those in the *Ecclesiazusae*, who would do nearly anything for sex.<sup>75</sup> The supposed adultery for which her transgression is known and which brings about her death is due not to her own actions, then, but those of her nurse. Even the Chorus sympathizes with the young wife of Theseus, stating:

“Dear Queen, it's you who are betrayed.  
Our misery is for you.  
What could we possibly say to help?  
Everything you suppressed  
is now out in the light.  
You have been broken beyond hope  
By your own treacherous, intimate friend” (Eur. *Hipp.* 884-890).

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<sup>74</sup> Zeitlin describes Hippolytus' suffering here as that of a woman in pain from childbirth or as one, like Phaedra, in pain from extreme desire (1985, 70-1).

<sup>75</sup> This is an important point, as Phaedra was clearly a hated figure in Classical Greece, being an inciting factor in the women of the *Thesmophoriazusae*'s plot against Euripides, despite the fact that she made no move to pursue the crime the goddess set her on the path toward.

For once Phaedra has been found out and her lust made known, her Nurse bullies the young woman through her speech, trying to get her concede to adultery for the sake of her life (Eur. *Hipp.* 669-673).<sup>76</sup> Though Nurse clearly cares for Phaedra and wishes to help her, throwing away her queen's wishes for the sake of her health was truly a treacherous and selfish thing to do, and it oversteps her boundaries as a servant. Nurse, then, and not Phaedra, is the one to blame for the tragedy that follows, and it is her transgression of social roles, not Phaedra's of gender roles, which helps Hippolytus to his doom.

There is a greater story at play in the *Hippolytus* than the scheming of Aphrodite, however. The legacy of Phaedra and Hippolytus' families are at the heart of the matter as well. As Phaedra calls out to her mother and sister in delirium, lamenting the lust that caused her mother to lie with a bull and her sister to desert one love for another, she sees in herself a continuation of the myths before, a familial connection as unescapable as any curse (Eur. *Hipp.* 508-516).<sup>77</sup> Though this connection may be wholly a product of her psyche, Phaedra clearly believes it to be true. The fact that she defies this fate and endures fasting because of it is heroically defiant, however useless it may appear.<sup>78</sup> Hippolytus also suffers from this ancestral curse, although Hippolytus chooses to react in the opposite manner, shunning the sexuality that brought Theseus to his mother and wholly accepting an Amazonian chastity which is so out of

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<sup>76</sup> Pelling brings up this point in his analysis of Nurse's speech for Phaedra to give into her lust, adding that the "antithetical" structure of Nurse's speech attempts to compare nonequivalent scenarios in a way which discomfits more than it persuades, leaving the listener feeling less than sure of the appropriateness of Nurse's motives (2005, 89-90).

<sup>77</sup> Ferguson 1972, 282.

<sup>78</sup> As Barnes' influential argument states, the purity of Phaedra's motives in starving herself as she does is rather questionable, since she could be doing so not as a sign of restraint but as one of visible pain so as to force others to help her with her problem (1960, 86). This argument, however, implies that Phaedra was willing to accept the sexuality that had been thrust upon her, while Phaedra's beliefs concerning her mother and sister clearly contradict this open acceptance of sexuality, and of adultery in particular.

place in a young Greek male.<sup>79</sup> From this angle, it becomes clear that Phaedra, although accepting of the sexuality passed down from her female relatives, nevertheless remains true to her husband in spirit, while Hippolytus, shunning his masculine birthright, embraces one which is both foreign and sexually transgressive by devoting himself to Artemis.

The *Hippolytus* defies convention both in the motivations of its characters and in the ways in which they transgress gender normative roles. While other males might be seen as feminine for their enslavement to the female sex and to sex in general, Hippolytus has no such ties. Instead, he possesses the femininity of the virgin, a nearly unattainable perfection for women and a strange and unnatural state for men. Phaedra, too, does not fit wholly into the role of the gender inappropriate female, as she is being forced into her path by Aphrodite herself, and not by any wish to do so on her own part. In some ways, however, Hippolytus' story is familiar. Like Pentheus before him, Hippolytus' punishment is not due wholly to his gender transgression, but to his transgression of ritual norms, in that he refuses to worship, or even acknowledge, Aphrodite.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, as Segal notes:

“Overtly repressing his sexuality, Hippolytus begins and ends in the wild; latently repressing his sexuality, King Pentheus moves from the inner, civilized space of house and city to the wild realm where his concealed violence really belongs”.<sup>81</sup>

Segal's point is sound, but relegating the similarities in Pentheus and Hippolytus' fates to mere sexuality overlooks the true similarity between them: that they did not wish to submit to a god that might take away the self-control which they hold so dear. This reluctance to give up power, coupled with their humiliation on account of their gender transgressions, is what brings the

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<sup>79</sup> Ferguson explores the topic of Hippolytus' and Phaedra's sexual inheritances in his analysis of the text, also focusing on the imagery of the sea which accompanies these passages, with the sea being both the birthplace of Aphrodite and a fitting metaphor for sexual acts (1972, 282-3).

<sup>80</sup> Powers explores the ways in which Pentheus and Hippolytus both fall short of possessing the ever-coveted *sophrosyne* because of their denial of gods which they view as impure, Pentheus because he does not know Dionysus is a god, Hippolytus because he fears and lacks understanding of Aphrodite's realm (2014, 104).

<sup>81</sup> Segal 1978, 133.



stories of Pentheus and Hippolytus together, the former in which the role of gender transgression is obvious, and the latter in which it is harder to find, but whose shock is no less despite it.

The *Trachinae* and the *Hippolytus* both show how gender inappropriate behavior is treated in tragedy. As the deaths of Heracles and Hippolytus alike have shown, an abnormal reliance on (or aversion to) sex are both acts which bring great suffering to the characters performing them. Furthermore, for female characters, asserting dominance over men or attempting to give in to sexual desires can prove disastrous. How might one differentiate between the transgressions of those like Hippolytus, then, who do not cross-dress, and those like Pentheus, who do? It is obvious that it does not take a transgression in spirit to perform one in body, as Pentheus did not wish to truly be seen as a woman when he took on his disguise, any more than Kinsman did. However, by donning the apparel of the opposite sex, the character is as doomed as if they had been defying gender normative roles for their entire life. Heracles and Deianeira, however, each managed to bend the rules of gender confirmative behavior for a large portion of their lives without breaking themselves in the process. It was only when this manifested in serious actions taken that it became a problem. The same was the case for Hippolytus as well. The gods may have allowed him to remain an oddity for the sake of Artemis; however, due to the scheming of Aphrodite and the actions of Phaedra and her nurse, Hippolytus was immediately and irrevocably doomed. Cross-dressing differs in that it is the very action which brings ruin, the transgression which goes beyond feelings and words. Without a prior offence, then, cross-dressing in Greek plays can still be fatal, while transgressive feelings on their own seem to be tolerated so long as they are not expressed outwardly.

## **Conclusions**

Cross-dressing in Greek drama is a complicated tool. It may be utilized by the playwright for mockery or as a threat, depicting characters who might never otherwise be seen as a woman in the guise of one or actively making a masculine character effeminate. The ways in which cross-dressing affects characters may depend on the genre in which it is found, as a comedy would likely employ it for humor more than a tragedy might; nonetheless, there are some rules that remain the same. For a man to dress as a woman, as in the case of Kinsman, is generally viewed as bad for the man, as he might be seen as lesser as a result. Like Agathon, someone who appears to be effeminate may be treated as such by society at large, and one who dresses as a woman would clearly be open to attack in this way. Conversely, women taking on masculine attributes, or going so far as to dress as men, might be viewed as usurpers, taking the rights of men which they are not (in the mind of Classical Greek society) worthy of, and using that power for their own feminine agendas, to the detriment of society as a whole.

However, there are some cases in which cross-dressing, or gender transgression in general, might be allowed. As Foley notes, temporary sex reversals were a common part of initiation rituals in the Classical Greek world, though they were not allowed in everyday life.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, those playing the parts of women in ritual contexts, such as in plays, might have gained something from it for themselves, even as they celebrated the god or goddess for whom the deed was performed.<sup>83</sup> Like Cadmus and Tiresias in the *Bacchae*, performing a humiliating role for the sake of a god may not have been looked down upon in Greek society by most, though a select few might have mocked those who did as Pentheus chastised his grandfather. It was when these roles were taken in on spite of ritual practices, as when Kinsman and Euripides

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<sup>82</sup> Foley 2001, 314.

<sup>83</sup> Wiles states that such roles, including those of old men, might be taken as an opportunity to transcend a weaker or lesser part of oneself, in order to progress to a greater personal strength (2000, 83).

infiltrated the Thesmophoria, that the problematic side effects of cross-dressing became evident and, in fact, deadly.

Cross-dressing in Greek drama seems to come about in three ways: for the sake of a god, in spite of a god, or, as with Agathon, for oneself. The lattermost example is the most problematic on a social scale, and the one which seems to have held the most enmity in the past, as Kinsman's taunts make clear. For though cross-dressing in order to do something against a god's wishes was clearly an offense, it was easily dealt with and handled by traditional means. Doing so in a way which upset the regular and highly separated gender roles of the times, however, was distressing on a deeper level, as it might upset the natural order by which the Greek world was run and regulated. As Pentheus both feared and admired the feminine beauty of Dionysus, those like Agathon showed a side of the Greek male which many feared to encounter or, worse, to become: a man with none of the rights of a man and all of the passions of a woman, who would be unable to protect himself or his body from the gaze and attentions of other, more traditionally masculine males. Though the ritual significance of taking on the guise of another gender was clearly important to the Greeks, the act in itself was nonetheless transgressive and ultimately destructive when performed outside of a ritual context.

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