

ESSAY

**MISSING WORD,  
STOLEN MEAL  
AND THE  
“MISSING” IN  
UNDERSTANDING  
ANCIENT WOMEN**

The case of  
Aristophanes'  
*Thesmophoriazousae*

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In the research on ancient women, the argument that, due to the assumed patriarchal censorship and/or forced oblivion, something is missing from written sources, archaeological evidence, visual material or ethnographic parallelism, is frequently introduced. This, for instance, is the main argumentative framework of the seminal study by Eva Keuls.<sup>1</sup> Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousae* is part of her argument there. Written and presented in the same year as *Lysistrata*, this comedy would thus witness of Aristophanes' interest in women's rebellion related to the *hermae* affair, which is the central topic of Keul's book.<sup>2</sup> Before she presents that conclusion, Keuls gives a rich textual and visual material about women's life in Athens, plentiful evidence of their harsh condition and undoubtful motivation to give a sign of their discontentment and grievances. The somewhat weak reasoning on Aristophanes' motives to write such a comedy finds a better footing there. Further on, Keuls posits that the other, much later comedy *Eccleziiazousae* (Women in the Assembly) is much less funny, based as it is on the real practice of the festival Skira.<sup>3</sup> Fantastic plots not related to reality are considered to be funnier: this less comedy – more reality formula is actually hard to defend. But even more questionable is the conclusion that Aristophanes was motivated by the real event, the castration of *hermae* for writing two of his most fantastic comedies. "Fantastic" here is taken in the sense of distance from reality. For the modern reader, *Birds* and *Frogs* might look more fantastic; but for the mainly or exclusively male public

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<sup>1</sup> Keuls, Eva C. *The Reign of Phallus*, University of California Press, 1993 (first edition 1985).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

in Athens, women on sexual strike and trial against tragic author may have looked as fantastic as birds telling their sad stories of human cruelty. *Eccleziastousae* may indeed have been obvious and recognizable because of the festival Skira. But they also offer a realistic account of Athenian life under tyrants (Praxagora's experience of hiding with her husband). Women practicing to speak "like men" are stealing the discourse of men in politics which they could overhear at homes, and they are performing as young, conservative men, using a double strategy: they are seductive to male citizens, and they further please them with their stereotypical views. It is exactly the closeness to reality, the subtle interplay of the recognizable and the impossible (women at the Assembly) that makes it funnier than any other Aristophanes' comedy.

Question of taste, one could argue. Maybe, but I would not argue further in this direction. I would take it though as an indicator that the farfetched conclusions are risky, and the small steps are less so. Therefore, big gaps and missing evidence can fail us even when we have plenty of contextual and highly suggestive material at our disposal. Small gaps and meagre related evidence could, however, tell us something – possibly important – about the position of women, patriarchal repression and censorship. This minimalist approach is rooted in some methods used by the French researchers in the anthropology of ancient worlds, members of the EHESS Centre Louis Gernet in Paris, which later was incorporated in INHA (L'Institut national de l'histoire d'art). They explored the ancient worlds by relating words and images, through semiotic and the historical research in an interdisciplinary context. One of the famous disciples of the school, Nicole Loraux, relied only on texts. Two great teachers of this schools, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal Naquet (along with Marcel Detienne in the early phase) were open to new theoretical and methodological experimentation. Ancient women's studies in Europe and the USA were very much influenced by the works of this school, which in its early writings were not exactly feminist. The works by Froma Zeitlin combine the French school approach to Antiquity and the American feminist interest in psychoanalysis, and her reading of *Thesmophoriazousae* is of special interest here. Zeitlin defines this comedy as follows:

It is located at the intersection of a number of relations: between male and female; between tragedy and comedy; between theater (tragedy and comedy) and festival (ritual and myth); between festival (Thesmophoria) and festival (the Dionysiac, which provides the occasion for its performance and which determines its comic essence); and, finally, between bounded forms (myth, ritual, and drama), and the more fluid "realities" of everyday life. All these relations are unstable and reversible: they cross boundaries and invade each other's territories; they erase and reinstate hierarchical distances to reflect ironically upon each other and themselves.<sup>4</sup>

The ritual and the more fluid "realities" of everyday life would be the intersection that I am looking for. The comedy presents women who do not take Acropolis for the sexual strike as in *Lysistrata*, rather they are there for their own regular ritual, and they do not impersonate men – instead, the comedy introduces three male personae who impersonate women: Euripides, who wants to send a male spy dressed as a woman, Agathon, who challenges gender order by proposing changing of gender according to poetic and personal desire, and Mnesilochus, who accepts Euripides' plan, but when he is revealed by women, wants to endure his punishment as a man. Women are the stable gender there all the time. Their position, gender-wise, socially and ritually, is real. Therefore, the question of what is missing in their doings, due to patriarchal censorship, is valid. The rituals during the three days festivals are numerous, and zigzag between sex, putrefaction, fertility and new life. We are not able to reconstruct the whole, only a few ritual elements are preserved. It was only when I had the opportunity to discuss with the artist Charlotte Jarvis who is looking for a celebratory, ritualistic way of making "female" semen, with other women in her *In Posse project*,<sup>5</sup> that I found the missing notion: Jarvis was looking for the food that could symbolically represent

<sup>4</sup> Zeitlin, Froma I. "Travesties of Gender and Genre in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousae*". *Critical inquiry* 8.2 (1981): 301–327, p. 303.

<sup>5</sup> <https://cjarvis.com/in-posse/>

the material needed for the "female" sperm, and I immediately thought of *panspermia*. How is it possible that the word does not appear in *Thesmophoriazousae*, the comedy in which women just perform their ritual duties, nothing fantastic or crazy? Among other things, they cook this meal made of different seeds, which has a special role in funeral rituals. *Panspermia* therefore is the missing evidence, and it does make sense to ask the question. This is how I tried to answer.

Several ancient authors mention a meal made of all kinds of seeds, or a ritual offering of different seeds, *panspermia*, which has left a trace in Balkan folklore, beliefs and church and funeral practices. The term itself also appears in a completely different semantic line since the ancient Greek philosopher Anaxagoras theorized about particles/seeds from which the world is made. Many centuries later, astronomers, physicists, geologists and other scientists reflected and posited different theories under the same term, *panspermia*, about the possibility that life on Earth started with "seeds", different life-creating materials coming to our planet with cosmic bodies, space dust or in other ways. At the end of this line of reasoning, there are also panspermic "theories" about outer-space creatures sending seeds, and their plans to inhabit/use/conquer the Earth (...). I will limit myself to the ritual aspects of *panspermia* and its relation to the creation of human life, focusing on women's rituals and on the Balkans, ancient and modern.

The semantic history of the word *panspermia* and its synonym *kolyva* is crucial to understanding the points in which the change of term also meant the change in practices. The second term comes from the ancient Greek word for a small coin, which then changed to "small cakes made of cooked wheat": such offerings were common for the gods of the Underworld and in funeral rituals. The term became a Balkan Graecism but, through the Orthodox church ritual, passed to Moldova and Russia, too. In all these cases, the dish of cooked wheat, nuts, honey, raisins and spices in different varieties is decorated usually with cross(es), covered with icing sugar and served at funerals, memorial services, Saturdays (which are the days of souls) and several other holy days, like the Serbian *slava* (the day of the family patron saint, if the saint is considered

“dead”). In Serbian, the dish is called *koljivo* or just *žito* (wheat), and it is also served in confectionaries and bakeries, usually with whipped cream. At funerals, everybody has to take a spoon of the dish before leaving. This reflects the old ritual of prevention and protection from revenge–thirsty souls, which are supposedly confused by the sharing of the symbolic guilt (of all living) through taking and consuming the dish, as they are confused if the people present at the funeral leave in different directions. Obviously, these ritual uses have kept the term *kolyva*. They are related to pre-Christian beliefs and not to church regulations, and practiced to communicate with the souls in an obviously much older way. What happened to *panspermia*, then? The use of *kolyva* and its different versions in different languages, which all relate to the same or similar material (seeds, food), similar processing (cooking) and (mostly funeral) rituals, leads to the hypothesis that the new semantic line needed a new term. The ancient term *panspermia*, although perfectly composed, could not be used because of its previous semantic history.

I will present just a few striking examples of how *panspermia* was “emptied” of its material/ritual meaning, and transferred to the discourse of philosophers, historians, archivists and other authors in a rather negative sense. Hypothetically, the reason for this is gender-based: a woman’s activity in the ritual social sphere were evaluated as lower, less important and subject to ridicule. In many cultures, anything coming from kitchen/cooking is often ridiculed. It is the same with cooking for a ritual purpose. Here, a reference to the research and debates on sacrifice is necessary: beside the seminal book by Detienne and Vernant,<sup>6</sup> Stella Georgoudi has done a lot of work on the topic.<sup>7</sup> The leading line of interpretation separates bloody sacrifice from the vegetal (aromatic dried herbs, cooked seeds): the first is an act of great importance for the political and religious coherence of the polis (state), the second

<sup>6</sup> Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *La cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*, Paris: Gallimard, 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Stella Georgoudi, Renée Koch Piettre and Francis Schmidt (eds.), *La cuisine et l'autel. Les sacrifices en questions dans les sociétés de la Méditerranée ancienne*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2005; S. Georgoudi, “Les Douze Dieux des Grecs: variation sur un thème”, in St. Georgoudi, J.-P. Vernant (eds.), *Mythes grecs au figuré*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996, 43–80.

remains among the rituals of the other kind, sometimes taken to the polis level, but usually not. Since women were not citizens, their participation in state rituals was minor. However, women's rituals were respected and their taboos kept strictly.

*Panspermia* has been used in the negative context since Aristoteles. The atomists, like Anaxagoras, used *panspermia* as an important theoretical term.<sup>8</sup> Aristoteles was changing the meaning,<sup>9</sup> but eventually the negative meaning of "mixture of everything/anything" has prevailed. Maybe the best example of this change of meaning is given by Lucian, in his philosophical dialogue with Hermotimos,<sup>10</sup> where he gives a visual image of the initial choice a philosopher has to make between schools of thinking. The first image is a comparison between choosing a philosophical school and testing the wine from a large recipient. Taking a small amount from a large container possibly gives a core of the way of thinking, but much more testing is necessary to get a good grasp of the whole. A different approach is taking a small quantity of grains which are in layers in a big container: it is an arbitrary choice, without any idea of structure or meaning. The two images obviously come from the marketplace. In the imaginary cognitive process, wine with its unified texture is privileged, while different grains (preparation for *panspermia*?) are deprived. "Some kind of *panspermia*", as Lucian puts it, corresponds with many expressions in many languages in which mixed elements make a funny meal, metaphorically a mess.

But mixing itself is crucial in the ritual; it means that different seeds, or seeds in general, have the power of connecting life and death and creating life. Apparently, they do not need any other force to germinate and to work in the space between life and

**8** Walter Burkert, *Kleine Schriften VIII: Philosophica*, edited by Thomas Alexander Szlezák and Karl-Heinz Stanzel, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001.

**9** *Ibid.*

**10** Hermotimos, Lucian 61:

ὄρα τοίνυν μὴ τῶδε μᾶλλον φιλοσοφία ἔοικεν: ὁ μὲν γὰρ πίθος ἔτι μενέτωσσι καὶ ὁ κᾶπιλος, ἐνέστω δὲ μὴ οἶνος, ἀλλὰ πανσπερμία τις, πυρὸς ὑπεράνω καὶ μετὰ τοῦτον κύαμοι, εἶτα κριθαὶ καὶ ὑπὸ ταύταις φακοί, εἶτα ἐρέβινθοι καὶ ἄλλα ποικίλα. πρόσει δὴ σὺ ὠνήσασθαι ἐθέλων τῶν σπερμάτων, καὶ ὅς ἀρελῶν τοῦ πυροῦ, οὐπερ ἦν, ἀνέδωκε σοὶ δεῖγμα ἐς τήνχειρα, ὡς ἴδοις, ἄρα οὖν ἔχοις ἂν εἰπεῖν εἰς ἐκεῖνο ἀποβλέπων εἰ καὶ οἶερ ἐβῖνθοι καθαροὶ καὶ οἱ φακοὶ εὐτακεῖς καὶ οἱ κύαμοι οὐ διάκενοι.

death. The self-recreating force of seeds, which is pushed back to the world of women and their rituals, does not contain anything masculine. Some of these elements can be recognized in the high summer festival of Adonia, during which women dress and make up in a seductive way and spend a night on the rooftops joking and feasting, while sprouts which they had forced from seeds for a certain time in broken pots wither away. Without men, they celebrate the shortcomings of masculine sexuality, symbolized by Aphrodite's lover Adonis.

The crucial link between blood, bones and seeds entailing the creation of life is to be found in Aristophanes' comedy *Thesmophoriazousae* (Women at the Festival of Thesmophoria), in which *panspermia* is not mentioned. Seed cakes in the form of snakes and *phalloi* were prepared for the festivals of Thesmophoria and Haloe (in late autumn, during harvest time). *Panspermia* is prepared for Pyanepsia festival: the ritual is connected to the myth of the founder consecrated to Theseus. It goes with the story of Theseus' return to Athens, with the boys saved from Minotaur on Crete. In order to thank Apollo, they prepared an improvised meal of everything they had, *panspermia*, ate it together and sacrificed it to the god too. I see this as a contamination or appropriation of a ritual. Myths about founders, which are younger and important for the state ideology, often "steal" older stories and rituals: the formula about the intelligence to survive (Gr. *metis*) is very popular and it is the plot-bearer in Homer's *Odyssey*. Boys' cooking is a "jump" of meaning in the formula, which serves the myth of the founder – and makes the storytelling more attractive. In other words, I believe that *panspermia* is misplaced here, maybe to undermine the well-known women's ritual and to give it a masculine attire in polis and in one of the most important state rituals. It celebrates Theseus, the prime hero of Athens, who formed the city by joining several villages into the city (*synoikismos*). Inclusion of *panspermia* in the heroic story is an act of appropriation, because it gives place to a recognizable women's ritual and thus includes something from women's ritual sphere to the state ritual.

In *Thesmophoriazousae* Aristophanes avoids the details of the ritual – cooking, seeds and everything, because his main line of interpretation is that men, because of the war they are instigat-



ing, have become women in the worst sense. To ridicule men, he presents women as true citizens who engage in a rational democracy. He also reverses gender roles in quoting Euripides' texts, and finally, makes men dress like women. Therefore, the whole female behaviour is represented as male/citizen's. But the main ritual is preserved in the comedy – it is in fact a parody of the ritual.

Mnesilochos, Euripides' relative who spies on women during the festival to help Euripides, who may become the object of women's vengeance for his writing about them, is demasked by women. Parodying one of Euripides' plays, he grabs a baby from the arms of a woman and threatens to slaughter it. While unwrapping the baby, he discovers that the baby is in fact a wine skin and in a hilarious scene he cuts it, so that the wine splashes while the "mother" tries to save the "blood" into a recipient. The reversal is perfect, because it points to women's alcoholism, a popular topic of ridiculing and maybe a real problem.<sup>11</sup> On a different level of meaning, this is a parody of the main ritual at the festival: women would kill a pig (which in Greek is a common metonymy for female genitalia), cut it to pieces and leave in a pit to decompose. Later, the remains would be mixed with seeds into the soil to fertilize it. Wine is the replacement for blood in many rituals, not only in Greek antiquity. The connection of blood/bones and seeds to form of a new life is unique. The main feature of such insemination is in fact the mixing of (female – pig) blood/body parts and seeds without other agents. The male element is present only in a symbolic form (cakes in form of genitalia).

I would like to posit here a base for further research, mostly in ancient texts, which would entail semiotics and semantic history of *panspermia* as an old, contaminated and appropriated ritual, understood as a prehistory of processing seeds in fertility rituals, done by women: the mixing of blood/body parts and seeds to produce life.

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<sup>11</sup> In antiquity, women were drinking in secret, having the access to home reserves, without mixing wine with water and not as a social habit.