

# Thesmophoriazusae

by Aristophanes

Have you ever looked closely at the masks of Comedy and Tragedy? The mask representing Melpomene, the Muse of Tragedy, has its mouth pulled down in an appropriate grimace. The mask of Thalia, Muse of Comedy, has the corners of its mouth pulled up. It's not an easy grin; it looks almost forced - and that's something to think about.

When Walter Kerr, the celebrated drama critic, sat down to write about comedy, he found that he kept stumbling over tragedy. He realized that he really couldn't deal with one without the other.

If you go through the plots of serious plays, you discover that it wouldn't take much to make them funny. You could turn "Hamlet" into something hilariously silly without too much effort. And it is only a slightly longer stretch to tease heavy material out of classic comedies.

If you've ever been at a serious public gathering - at a church service or solemn civic ceremony - and something goes wrong, it suddenly becomes funny and you can find it hard not to laugh. Very often, ministers blend humor with sadness at funerals, making remarkably easy transitions from one to the other. It doesn't detract from the solemnity of the occasion; the contrast actually heightens its serious impact.

When Aristophanes wrote *Thesmophoriazusae*, he picked one of ancient Athens' most serious and dislocating observances as a vehicle for poking fun at the tragic playwright, Euripides. While the classic Greeks loved food, wine, and merriment, their religious observances had a strong undercurrent of sadness, almost despair, in them.

If you examine these rites, you find a profound pessimism in them. The Greeks thought the gods were indifferent to human suffering and often seemed to treat humans cruelly, or used them for their amusement. This may be traced back in time to the wholesale destruction of the Minoan and Mycenaean Civilizations which preceded the Golden Age of Athens. The apparently idyllic Minoan Empire was obliterated in a tremendous volcanic eruption on the Island of Thera, which leveled their major cities and reduced this powerful civilization to nothing.

The Mycenaeans, who followed them, also suffered a catastrophic collapse. From this history, the Greeks may have taken the notion that nothing can be counted on; that Fate can make human effort and aspiration futile. Certainly there is a darkness at the heart of classic Greek ritual and belief.

During the Thesmophoria, the married women of Athens, normally closely bound to their homes, abandoned their husbands and families for three full days, completely

disrupting normal life. The rite commemorated the myth of Demeter, the goddess of grain, who disappeared for a while, turning the whole earth barren.

During the Thesmophoria, men were forbidden to be anywhere near the women, so they were never sure just what went on, but they knew that one of the customs was a ritual cursing of their husbands.

Aristophanes parodied the ceremony, and speculated that the women spent their time planning revenge on Euripides for his treatment of women in his plays (Think of the child-slaughtering Medea, or Hecuba, who blinded her male enemy, Polymestor).

The comedy begins with Euripides, accompanied by his father-in-law Mnesilochus, looked for the playwright, Agathon. Agathon was noted for his effeminate manner and Euripides wanted him to sneak into the Thesmophoria in female attire, to find out what the women were plotting.

Agathon refuses, so Mnesilochus volunteers to take the risk instead. The crusty old farmer is tricked out in feminine attire and prepares to join the women. Of course, they soon spot the impostor and threaten him with savage retribution. He calls out to Euripides for help and the playwright offers to send different heroes in his plays to extricate the old man from his predicament. Unfortunately, Agathon frustrates each rescue attempt.

The comedy depends on the audience's intimate knowledge of Euripides' work. Parts of three different plays are quoted by the characters who spoke them, but in ridiculous attire and mangled phrasing. It's the kind of comedy which would be incomprehensible to a modern audience. Greek scholars might get a chuckle or two, but that's it.

In adapting the play for contemporary use, the Genesis Guild substitutes for Euripides' tragedies, classic radio or television shows, such as "The Lone Ranger," or, from old first-grade readers, Dick, Jane, and their dog, Spot.

In true Aristophanic fashion, the guild version also makes fun of local people and events, national news and trends, and - most importantly - its own productions and theatrical traditions.

Songs and dances play a part in the show - just as they did in Aristophanes' works - but the aim in them for the guild is humor, not precision. Greek comedy traditionally comes at the end of a Genesis Guild season, providing a final burst of energy at the end of a strenuous summer schedule.

This is concentrated in a final, frenetic pantomime, patterned after the silent movie's Keystone Cops chases. It all ends with the cast collapsing to close the play and the season.