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978-0-521-03790-7 - Women and Humor in Classical Greece

Laurie O'Higgins

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

I HAVE LONG THOUGHT ABOUT silence and oblivion, their power, and the strategies that writers, ancient and modern, employed to impose or to shatter them. I began my scholarly life working on the figure of Ajax within Greek tradition, and later I turned to women in Greek literature. This drew me to consider real women in archaic and classical Greece, their speech and silence, and their one-sided relationship with the literary tradition.

A striking asymmetry marked women's joking traditions, it seemed; they participated actively in cultic joking, but in the satiric and comic literatures of ancient Greece they appeared chiefly as targets. If, as in old comedy, they functioned as agents, it was in fantastic situations, perhaps intended to shock and amuse by their implausibility or incongruity. In short, the literary tradition gave little direct evidence of women as makers of humor in their own right. In recent scholarship on ancient comedy, attention has been given to women, but scholars have viewed them generally as emblems of larger comic issues, or as the means – as in tragedy – for ancient playwrights to explore male identity. It is time to focus (again) on the – admittedly vexed – question of women's agency, women's voice, in order to understand both men and women more fully.¹

The very possibility of women's "own" voice has been much debated. In its most radical form, theorists have posed the full question, is there such a thing as a women's authentic voice? French feminists have tended to take a skeptical view; in a patriarchal culture man "owns" language. He is consistently the subject and positive reference point of his own discourse. This leaves women to occupy the position of negative pole, or object. As speakers, as literary creators ("writers"), they cannot but work within a language and conceptual system that is essentially masculine.² Women cannot resist their secondary status without some kind of linguistic transgression.³

Irigaray, who has been especially influential in classical scholarship, has traced this alienation of the female from language back to the classical period, and to Plato in particular.⁴ As Skinner has pointed out, however, Plato

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is not representative of classical Greece in general. The highly segregated nature of ancient societies made possible a women's culture that offered a degree of independence from the male-run world. This in turn raises the possibility that within their semiautonomous culture women could deploy language in distinctive ways. I believe that women's cults facilitated the evolution of a tradition of "women's speech," a speech that could in some cases nourish a women's literary tradition but that mostly existed simply to sustain, connect, and amuse its practitioners. In this position I follow Skinner, Showalter, and others,⁵ but I also take it a step further. Women's voices, and women's deployment of "their" Greek language, whatever that may have sounded like, reverberated throughout the society as a whole, leaving a mark on what has survived into our world.⁶

In the course of this brief introduction, I show the importance of the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* for our understanding of women's cultic joking. I also posit a relationship between the joking that took place in (mostly women's) cults of Demeter, the women's and men's cults of Dionysus, and the hypermasculine ancient genres of iambic and old comedy. On the face of it, this seems unlikely. Cultic joking served to strengthen social bonds by focusing members of the worshipping group on each other, mocking and teasing so as to level differences, but not so as to wound or humiliate. Yet the iambic genre perfected the kind of joking that tightens a group through rejection and contemptuous assaults on some designated outsider(s). Nonetheless, I believe that women's cultic joking affected and indeed inspired the ancient genre that we know as iambic.

This leads to comments on the importance of the spoken word in antiquity generally and on how any student of ancient literature (oral or written) must bear in mind that what we read (usually in silence) was produced in a world filled with and shaped by the human voice. Then I turn to the issues facing anyone attempting to read the various sources on women's cults and on women's role in ancient life generally. A section on the terminology used by ancient authors to describe women's cultic speech precedes a chapter-by-chapter outline of the book.

The Hymn to Demeter

Years ago an incident in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* caught my attention. This early-sixth-century B.C.E. epic tells how Hades kidnapped Persephone from Demeter. The bereaved goddess, disguised as an old woman, entered the palace at Eleusis but refused a seat or refreshment

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πρίν γ' ὅτε δὴ χλεύης μιν' Ιάμβῃ κέδν' εἰδνῖα
 πολλὰ παρὰ σκώπτονσ' ἐτρέψατο πότνιαν ἀγνήν
 μειδῆσαι γελάσαι τε καὶ ἵλαον σχεῖν θυμόν·
 ἦ δή οἱ καὶ ἔπειτα μεθύστερον εὔαδεν ὄργαῖς.

until decorous Iambe, with jokes
 and many a mocking jest moved the holy lady
 to smile and laugh and have a gracious heart.
 Even afterwards she used to cheer her moods. (202–5)

The *Hymn* presents this jesting as the *aition* or foundation story for the joking practiced by women within certain cults of Demeter. Iambe's intervention occurs without a request, without a preamble or permission. Iambe's speech, as far as we can tell, included no specific message or instruction. In and of itself, however, it seems to have functioned as a transformative, healing act and a gesture of welcome to the community.⁷ Furthermore, it began a sustained, joyful relationship, breaking the tension that had marked Demeter's entry into the circle of women.

The descriptions of both Iambe's speech and Demeter's reaction are important.⁸ Iambe "intervenes with jokes and mockery." The goddess smiles, laughs, and has a joyful heart – and is cheered again on subsequent occasions. There is a continuum in each case: from jesting to tempered aggression, from mild acknowledgment to hearty laughter, and to sustained graciousness and repeated joy. When we go on to consider its "afterlife" (in women's cults of Demeter), we must bear in mind this breadth of implication. This cultic speech covered a range of tone and attitude. It inspired a range of reaction in its immediate addressee (Demeter), and within the microcommunities of her cult the speech has an enduring, bonding, and stabilizing effect.

The author(s) of the *Hymn* spotlighted Iambe's jokes as a symbolic prototype for cultic abuse, mockery, and obscenity, practiced especially in the worship of Demeter and Dionysus. Men and women could engage in such speech, although in the rites of Demeter it tended to be a female preserve. I am concerned with women's use of such speech here. The *Hymn*'s Iambe episode, which took place within an all-female group, probably referred to the Thesmophoria, a vital Demetrian rite, exclusive to women.⁹ The poet(s) of the *Hymn* invented the eponymous heroine Iambe to "explain" a preexisting cultic phenomenon: women's cultic joking. At the same time, the Iambe myth, as told within the *Hymn*, can be understood as an aspect of the women's cult to which it refers.¹⁰

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Joking generally was – and is – shared. A person jokes, and at least one other listens and reacts. Joking builds or strengthens a group, sometimes deliberately and self-consciously. In archaic and classical Greece this group-building could occur in two ways, which were not mutually exclusive but which tended to work asymmetrically, with one mode predominating on a given occasion. One was exclusion, that is, marking boundaries or a power differential. A group defined its boundaries by joking contemptuously at individuals perceived as outsiders. This type of joking established a hierarchy or “pecking order.” The other type of joking emphasized connection within a community – even within a cultic community subdivided into mock rival groups. This joking focused group members on each other, not on those outside the pale. It tended to break down hierarchies within the community.¹¹

Cultic joking tended to belong to the latter type of group building, I believe. Although it could be abusive, it was not intended to rupture the worshipping group but to foster a collective identity. One might imagine that such introverted joking – often occurring in secret cults – would be less likely to migrate to new environments. Alternatively, the more “extroverted” joking could flourish in literary, semisecular contexts, such as poetic competitions. The literary genre of joking, iambic or satire, was indeed weighted toward the extroverted end of the joking spectrum – an expression of contempt for persons perceived as alien. Yet many poems in the iambic genre, and the men credited with creating those poems, were affiliated with Demeter’s cult, as I show in Chapter 3. Moreover, the “speaking name” of the *Hymn*’s mocking servant, Iambe, suggests that literary *iambos* drew some of its breath and life from cultic antecedents.¹²

Iambic poems, usually coarse in tone and often in iambic meter, were recognized as belonging to the iambic genre through the type of occasion at which they were performed – originally festivals of Demeter and Dionysus in all likelihood. Iambic poetry, like the ritual mockery with which it was linked, also already existed at the time of the *Hymn*’s composition; its heyday was the seventh and sixth centuries.¹³ By the classical period, cultic jokes and practices and literary jokes existed side by side, and people undoubtedly recognized their kinship. The *Hymn*’s “Iambe incident” thus inevitably evoked both versions of *iambos*, cultic and literary.

From the point of view of the *Hymn to Demeter*, Iambe bore a “double” progeny: a long-lived practice of cultic abuse and joking, often uttered by

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women in all-female contexts, and literary iambic, which was predominantly male. Iambic poetry brutally targeted women and debased them with venom that seemed propelled from the genre's very core. Lambe's twin offspring provoked questions for me: how to unravel the complex relationship of women with speech, cultic and literary, and how to recover, or at least find the echoes of, a type of women's speech that did not attain literary status.

Iambic's as yet unborn fifth-century sibling, Attic comedy, also would evolve from a range of cults, especially those of Demeter and Dionysus. In comedy's case, the sixth-century B.C.E. Athenian boom in Dionysus worship meant that Dionysian cult became the city's preeminently visible and renowned context for cultic joking. The hypermasculine civic cult of the City Dionysia has tended to obscure the role of women in Athenian cultic joking and mockery, but women played a crucial part in the cults that also would nurture Attic comedy. Furthermore, despite the momentum of Dionysian cult and despite the legal restrictions on women's participation in certain "licentious" cults, women continued to joke and mock in vital cults throughout the fifth century and for long afterward. Thus, the genres of iambic and comedy not only had roots in cults in which women joked (in some cases, these cults being exclusive to women), but they flourished in a world in which such cultic speech was a living reality. Ancient comedy and iambic evince substantial interest in women, their actions, worship, thoughts, fantasies, and flaws – and speech.

A deeper understanding of the connections between Greek cultic joking (in which women's voices carried considerable power) and literary joking makes clear that the context in which the ancient literary genres flourished was partly shaped by women.¹⁴ The literary evidence may better be understood not only as part of a literary tradition, but as an element of a polemical, joking dialogue between men and women. Almost by definition, surviving poetry, whether comic or iambic (satiric), is the product of male élites with some degree of power and autonomy within their respective political systems. The survival of literary texts and the total loss of the oral culture in which these texts grew has distorted our view of the culture as a whole and blinkered our vision of its surviving fragments.

Joking and laughter constituted a mode of engagement, in which power was negotiated. It was precisely because women's cultic joking was so formidable a force that it generated such a strong response among male satirists and comic poets. I am not suggesting that women's cultic joking was enacted unequivocally against men en masse. The fact that women

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could and did joke among themselves was, however, threatening to men – even as it was essential within certain major cults. This was a locus off limits to men and with its own legitimacy and power. Thus, when Aristophanes and others portrayed women as jokers or as jokes, they were appropriating women's voices and using them for their own ends. Part of the objective of this book is to revive the context of ancient satire and comedy. We need to understand these genres not as unilateral expressions of individual men or simply as voices within self-reflective traditions, although they were, in part. Rather, they were elements within a negotiation of power, deriving from complex and integrated societies.

The Power of the Spoken Word

Because our sources have not recorded women's cultic speech, there is a natural inclination to throw up our hands and consider only those data we have.¹⁵ This, however, is as irresponsible as it is seemingly safe. There are reasons for pressing forward, albeit cautiously. In the essentially preliterate world of classical Greece, the spoken word weighed more than it does for us.¹⁶ We often regard the spoken word as evanescent; for fifth-century Greeks it constituted a permanent reality. We may shrug when a politician admits to having sworn falsely; the Athenians were aghast when Euripides' Hippolytus said just that. It toppled a bastion of reality: the oath. The spoken word's power, both normative and transgressive, was particularly felt in religious contexts, in which it constituted a crucial and fragile link between gods and mortals; a single misspoken utterance could invalidate an entire ritual.

All speech was weighty, potentially destabilizing, and destructive and so was controlled in many contexts. These controls could be legally prescribed or function as part of an uncodified system of social constraint. Constraints on women were tighter, given the widespread belief that women could not control their own conduct. Thus, the transgressive speech of women, including, paradoxically, the iambic speech required by certain cults, potentially was more subversive and thus more powerful than that of men.¹⁷

Iambic literature explicitly depicted itself or was seen as having emerged from a polarized context in which a disagreement had occurred. One need not postulate an actual dispute, but it is vital, when reading ancient iambic, to keep in mind the ancient belief in its disputatious beginning – the involvement of two parties. The modern world has inherited a fragment of

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one party to the dispute, or one pole of the antithesis. We do not hear and we neglect to consider the perspective of the “other.” Although women are not often directly addressed in iambic, they routinely appear as key figures in the dispute.

One way to view their involvement is to say that they functioned (merely) as the means by which the iambicist could attack his male enemies. Certainly there is truth to this proposition in a world where a man’s honor depended on the chastity and decorum of his female relatives, it being his responsibility to maintain order in the household. Yet there is more to iambic’s hostile interest in women, I believe. Women played a role in their own right. When, as was often the case, women functioned as the targets of iambic, they were routinely mocked and rebuked for crass sexuality. I present the following as hypothesis, to be tested over the next four chapters: iambic censured women’s licentious cultic speech in a “secular” world where the license of cult no longer protected it. The abusive and obscene speech of women within their cults seemed to have “invited” a quarrel, of which iambic was the voice of the surviving combatant: the angry “response.” The genre must be recontextualized by modern readers if it is to be understood.

Aischrologia

Of all the types of speech associated with women, none exceeded cultic joking in power and impact. As I noted in discussing the “foundation” story of the *Hymn to Demeter*, Iambe’s address to Demeter explicitly covered a range of tone and attitude, from jest to mockery. I suggest that some of the terms describing this speech are inclusive of the whole range (terms such as *aischrologia*), whereas others single out some aspect of it (such as *blasphemēin*).

Cultic mocking speech was variously described in ancient sources on the rites of Demeter: speech “such as one would find in a brothel”; *aischrologia* (shameful speech), *arrheta*, *aporrheta* (unspeakable things); verbs connoting abuse (*loidorein*), mockery (*diaskoptein*) and blasphemy (*blasphemēin*). In Demeter’s worship it occurred in exchanges between women in segregated contexts.

“Speech such as one would find in a brothel” alerts us to the sexual content of this speech. As Henderson has noted, *aischrologia* and terms like it imply shame, the feeling that accompanies the exposure of what ought to remain private. It is not the same as our modern notion of

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obscenity, which implies dirt and pollution, something inherently nasty. For the Greeks sexual congress was natural, enjoyable – but private.¹⁸ Those parts of the body associated with sex similarly were not in themselves dirty but were private. To render them public was to transgress. The speech that exposes sexual parts or sexual behavior was expected to have a shaming effect – on the speaker, the addressee, a larger audience, or a party being described or implicated within the speech. Thus, such shame-inducing speech routinely implied aggression and could be perceived as insulting to the person at whom it was directed. The question is, how do we weigh and understand that shame, that aggression, especially within the marked context of cult? Is it felt equally by women and men, by participants, and by observers?

The terms *arrheta* and *aporrheta* refer to what should not or cannot be spoken. This taboo may be interpreted in different ways. Either the subject was not supposed to be divulged, or the words were so shameful as to make it virtually impossible to utter them under normal conditions.¹⁹ Both readings of *arrheta* imply challenges for the modern scholar. Obviously taboos regarding disclosure impede the transmission of information and render suspect the accounts that do survive. If we consider the implications of shameful speech – *aischrologia* – we face questions of perspective and attitude.

Most of the terms imply or connote sanction or disapproval. Outsiders, invariably men, deployed these terms and descriptions. The standards and norms implicit in them are those of a public, authoritarian, male-run world. Some, such as the Church Fathers, disdain the practices they describe. From their perspective, the speech appears defiant. We may conclude that even if the women engaged in such speech would have recognized the terms, they might have contested their use or meaning. The practitioners might not have endorsed fully or shared the notions of shame and transgression implicit in some of the terms.

The Greek αἰσχρόν (the first element in the word *aischrologia*) also has an aesthetic dimension, which is crucial to our understanding of *aischrologia*. τὸ αἰσχρόν suggests something opposed to the proportion, grace, containment, and harmony of σωφροσύνη, for example. This speech (and again, of course, we face the problem of whose perspective is being considered) is identified as ugly, intemperate, even repellent. I argue in my discussions of the women's cults that a celebratory and self-conscious *grotesquerie* marked both their speech and their behavior.

Archaic and classical Greece was a culture obsessed with male honor. Modern scholars have explored the implications of this worldview, using

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comparative evidence from modern anthropological studies of Mediterranean and other cultures.²⁰ The maintenance of a man's personal honor was a heavy responsibility and constant concern to him in an environment where watchful eyes monitored every move. It entailed control of his female relatives, whose chastity and sexual decorum (at least as known to the rest of the world) reflected on his manly capacity to police the boundaries of his household. Women, too, had a stake in the system, but they were not understood to be capable of self-regulation, as was a virtuous and competent man. Their relationship with "honor" and its antithesis "shame" was a function of their role in a man's world. Within the world of women's cults, however, a woman might not have felt her conduct and speech as equally constitutive of her family's honor.²¹ Instead, detached from father, husband, brothers, and sons, she looked at other women, like herself, and created, with ribald and mocking speech, a new community.

Perhaps practitioners or observers perceived in the speech a challenge to "real-world" norms and values. Without women's own testimony, we cannot know their spectrum of opinion. As I show, however, the partial evidence that survives indicates that men perceived this cultic speech as significantly unsettling and contestatory, in addition to its presumable value within "fertility" cults.²²

Reading between the Lines

In assessing ancient evidence, one must remember that sources often spoke prescriptively about the role of women in society; they reflected an official view of a world segregated along gender lines, with women relegated to the private sphere of the home and family.²³ Such "packaging" of the world means that women's (often secret or separate) activities affecting the public world of state or community as a whole did not usually receive explicit acknowledgment, even though such activities were indeed felt to be important.²⁴ In the case of iambic abuse – of women's errant sexual behavior – we are seeing a form of social control whose very virulence suggests fear: that women did not, or might not, conform to societal codes. The vehemence suggests contestation, not unanimity.

Most scholars know better than to take literally what a comic or iambic poet says about women (or anything else), but the problems of contextualizing and assessing evidence apply across all genres. The fact that a theme received particular attention among historians, philosophers, or orators may mean that it was the subject of controversy and not that our author is stating his society's consensus for the benefit of future generations.²⁵

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We may learn more from what is assumed or taken for granted than from what is pointed out deliberately. In addition to the trickiness of assessing authors' complex agenda and purposes in writing, there may be questions regarding their insight and understanding. Almost by definition, for example, our sources on secret cults did not share the reverence felt by many in the communities in which they were practiced. The *Hymn to Demeter*, for example, emphatically prohibits speaking of the Mysteries of Demeter.²⁶

Ideally we would have women's views on their own activities to complement what men said about them. We don't.²⁷ Winkler's work has shown how great the potential difference between what women may have thought themselves to be doing in cults and what men thought – or said – about them. I modify his argument, however.²⁸ There did exist a woman's perspective and knowledge that differed from men's, but I do not think that this perspective and collective wisdom was entirely a closed book to their male contemporaries.²⁹ Male sources, even hostile male sources, although obviously not ideal, nonetheless yield real insights into the "alien" world(s) of women.

Whether in the field of religion or of literature, men's and women's voices invariably were part of a single system. It is crucial to consider the total entity – especially when one is dealing with a seemingly all-male phenomenon such as old comedy or iambic. Brumfield has suggested that ancient feminine consciousness was "expressed in ironic coda to the masculine point of view" and may be imagined as "like a double star whose invisible member's orbit can only be plotted from the movement of its visible twin."³⁰ To take her thesis further, I believe that we can hope to comprehend the male perspective only by tracking that feminine star that so often moved in its shadow.

Summary of Chapters

In Chapter 1 I discuss women's joking and its function(s) within the cults of Demeter and Dionysus. I focus particularly on the Thesmophoria. My approach to women's ritual here and throughout the book is synthetic, broadly feminist, and influenced by recent anthropological theory, especially practice theory.³¹ Women's minds and bodies were shaped by their experience of culture. At the same time, they were makers of ritual, agents in reproducing and defining their festivals in an ever-changing political and social context. I take another look at *aischrologia* at the end of Chapter 1, considering how one might imagine women's perspective(s) as