

Undercover *Xenos*:  
The Consequential Effects of Cross-dressing in *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Bacchae*

The phenomenon of Greek cross-dressing (*παρενδυσία*) is very common in the Aristophanic corpus. It is especially prominent in his *Thesmophoriazusae* where an interesting role play unfolds both dramatically and grammatically at the level of gender. *Thesmophoriazusae* addresses the “problem” of men playing women in the conversation at Agathon’s house and later puts it to the test, when Mnesilochus wears the *κροκοτώς* (chaffron robe) in order to infiltrate the mysteries and pass as a “woman.” Euripidean tragedy too passes comment on the metatheatrical dimension of the tragic actor’s costume, as Euripides experiments with cross-dressing in his *Bacchae*. In one of the play’s most dramatically arresting scene, Dionysus dresses up Pentheus with female garments as a Maenad, placing him under similar circumstances to those of Mnesilochus in *Thesmophoriazusae*.

The issue of cross-dressing has been thoroughly analyzed by Zeitlin (1981) who in her pioneering article highlights the similarities between the Kinsman and Pentheus, each of whom spy on secret women-only rituals and hence violate gender constraints. She further maintains that the structural proximity between Bacchic rites and the Thesmophoria renders them “ideological opposites” of each other. On the other hand, Schwartz (2013) identifies the image of the foreigner in Dionysus who in the context of an extended masquerade returns to his homeland, Thebes. Building upon Schwartz, the aim of this paper is to approach the dramatic depiction of the foreigner (*xenos*), in connection with Mnesilochus’ and Pentheus’ position as ritual outsiders. After discussing the religious and political connotations of “cross-dressing”, my reading of the two plays grounds the intra- and intertextual comparison within the analysis of dramatic and performative elements such as gestures, language, staging, as well as character behavior.

In *Thesmophoriazusae* Mnesilochus as well as Dionysus and Pentheus in *Bacchae* play the role of the foreigner and transgressive outsider, posing a threat to the unity of the group. In this way, each dramatic setting negotiates the violation into the female ritual circle against the risks it establishes for the *polis*. Mnesilochus parades into the *Themophoria* dressed as a woman to salvage what is left of the condemnatory verdict of the women's assembly against Euripides, while Dionysus is the stranger who threatens the *ethos* of the city by trying to initiate its inhabitants into a new cult; finally, Pentheus, dressed in the *krokotos*, tries to penetrate the Dionysian mysteries and to stamp out the “morbid” elements, the Maenads. The cultic pariahs, Mnesilochus and Pentheus, who break down the sanctity of the only-women rituals by changing their gender, challenge the integrity of the group, ritual and civic. Dionysus’ rejection by Pentheus, on the other hand, mirrors a deeper political crisis in Thebes. Significantly, Pentheus’ own foreign lineage as descendant of *Echion* and the *Spartoi* informs his portrait as outsider, marking his self-alienation and political demise.

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