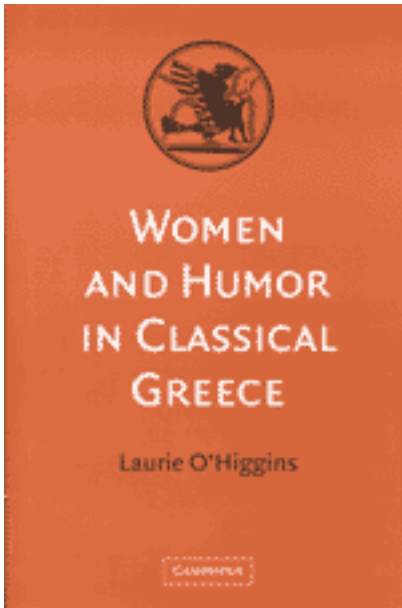


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O'Higgins, Laurie

Women and Humor in Classical Greece

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Women and Humor in Classical Greece is an intricate book that needs more than one reading to be understood completely. Laurie O'Higgins intends to explore again the admittedly vexed "question of women's agency, women's voice, in order to understand both men and women more fully" (1), using an approach that is "synthetic, broadly feminist, and influenced by recent anthropological theory, especially practice theory" (10). In this text the focus is primarily on women's speech and the resultant literary tradition as it is mediated through women's cults. O'Higgins theorizes that joking in cults that were male-exclusive motivated the development of iambic genre (2). The author finds evidence for this theory in ancient comedy.

In purposeful and accidental ways joking creates or reinforces a group by excluding those who are different or considered outsiders, in this case men, or by emphasizing the unity of a communal subgroup. In the latter instance, the proscribing group would divide into smaller units, and the ridicule would be directed at the members of the cult itself. The author speculates that men would have perceived this cultic humor as "significantly unsettling and contestatory" (9) and limited to the ritual occasions and not sanctioned for use in secular activities. The use of this type of humor outside the protective environment of the cult would have caused a serious clash among the domestic, public, and religious

spheres, since men perhaps would not have been able to understand or appreciate the “celebratory and self-conscious *grotesquerie*” that marked cultic “speech and behavior” (8). It should be noted that O’Higgins bases this speculation on incomplete evidence and is therefore hardly definitive. The premise of the book looks beyond the depiction of women in the Dionysian theater “for those laughing women’s voices, both those imagined by the comic playwrights and their real counterparts, heard and unheard by men” (14).

In chapter 1, “Cultic Obscenity in Greece, Especially Attica,” the author analyzes the rituals of Demeter, the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, and the coarse and insulting exchanges used by the cult members. Discussion briefly touches on the Scira, and greater analysis is supplied for the Thesmophoria; the latter reformed and strengthened “bonds among women, bonds that marriage might otherwise attenuate” (26). O’Higgins expertly weaves throughout this the chapter (as well as the rest of the book) the idea that women knew that the language and gestures used at the rituals may have been considered shameful according to public (male) norms, but that in the cult activities different rules applied. In the following chapter, “Iambe and the *Hymn to Demeter*,” the author searches beyond the Homeric hymn for data in epic that shows that the hymn is atypical and highly unusual in nature of the character of Iambe. It is Iambe, after all, that delineates clearly the “grotesque paradox that lay of the heart of women’s cultic jesting . . . the pregnant crone” (44).

The third chapter, “Iambic’s Relationship with the Female,” postulates that it was the “implicit dialogue between male hierarchical orderliness—literary and societal—and the threatening disorder of women’s cultic laughter” (58) that shaped the development of the iambic genre. After supplying a definition for *iambos*, which the author notes is a difficult matter given the scarcity of the genre and the meager evidence, as encompassing literature that included a range of attitudes, from irony to “lighthearted drollery” (60), O’Higgins proceeds to the female characters in the genre. The authors (Archilochus, Semonides, Hipponax) were without a doubt misogynistic in their portrayals of women, and thus, it is suggested, iambic literature became a means by which men could dictate social rules. The successful iambic author not only obviates any opposition or potential offense against himself but also blots out the female and cultic origin of the genre. The examination of the iambic genre continues in the next chapter, “Women’s Iambic Voices,” in which the author explores Sappho’s possible contribution to this type of literature, or as O’Higgins suggests, Sapphic material that may be “subsumed under the heading of iambic” (87; Corinna is also briefly examined). The themes and elements common to iambic poetry (“abuse to mild mockery” [97]) and not the meter set the parameters for the analysis of the Sapphic corpus. As in the case of Archilochus, who includes warm moments in his usually vituperative work, there may be elements in the

Sapphic corpus that may be speculatively interpreted as iambic in nature. The genre therefore may not be strictly a male monopoly.

The last two chapters, “Comedy and Women” and “Women at Center Stage,” evaluate the place of women in the *polis* and the development of tragedy and Greek old comedy. O’Higgins notes that Solon restricted the roles of females in public lamentations and narrowed their participation to cultic activities; the concomitant shift from female-dominated cultic activity to the male possession of the writing and performing of plays is also due to Solon and his reforms. Women were expected to “efface themselves from the public sphere, the focus of ever-increasing energy and activity” (106); just as the lack of female participation in tragedy and funeral lamentations is clearly evidenced by the historical record, so too, O’Higgins suggests, women’s voices vanished from the development of comedy. This is not to say that women completely disappeared or were not mentioned by the comic playwrights, since women were visible in old comedy in “mythical tales, fantastic or utopian tales, women characters portraying or depicting entities such as cities or islands, and mockery of historical women (relatives of Athenian politicians and notables)” (111). It is at this point in the text that O’Higgins is most interesting and yet most speculative, when it is proposed that women were present at the performances of the comedies: “educated women” were not only present but also perhaps read the plays (137). Unfortunately, there is no reference to or review of the rates of literacy at this juncture, so the reader has to be careful about the rest of the author’s opinions. If this theorizing is in fact correct, then we all must reconsider what the playwrights had in mind when they composed their plays. In the last chapter this assumption is put to the test in a review of the *Thesmophoriasuzae*, *Ecclesiasuzae*, and *Lysistrata*: since Aristophanes had “domestic knowledge of women’s conversation,” “knowledge of the cultic exchanges in which women participated,” and witnessed “men and women in Dionysiac cultic exchanges” (146), the author draws the conclusion that the comedy is not exclusive of women but rather meant to be interactive, that is an ongoing dialogue between the playwright and women, “albeit an unequal one” (146).

I recommend the text for graduate students and those expert in the field of women’s studies and Greek tragedy and comedy. The book will most definitely spark debate, which is precisely what scholarship should do.