

Presentation: “Enforcing Expectations: Cross-Dressing and its Consequences in Aristophanic Comedy and Euripidean Tragedy”

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The presence of cross-dressing in ancient Greek comedies and tragedies is built into the genre’s original conventions: all actors were male, and necessarily had to cross-dress to perform female roles. However, the cross-dressing of characters within Greek drama is often seen as progressive by the modern reader, as it appears to break the strict gender binary of Greek society. Even among scholars of Greek drama, relatively little research exists that does more than tip hat to the use of cross-dressing as much more than a humorous plot device. On the contrary, this paper finds that cross-dressing in Greek drama can provide significant insight into ancient Greek perceptions of gender and enforces a strict gender binary. This paper claims that cross-dressing in Greek drama, despite its probing of gender performance, ultimately enforces the rigid divides between the masculine and feminine found in ancient Greek society. To investigate this, this paper examines two comedies by Aristophanes, *Women at the Thesmophoria Festival* and *Assemblywomen*, and *The Bacchae*, a tragedy by Euripides. Surveying these three plays through my paper, I suggest that the behaviors adapted by a successful cross-dressing indicate what the ancient Greeks believed was ‘essential’ to men and women. Though women cross-dress in *Assemblywomen*, they cannot escape the feminine realm of the home. Though men cross-dress in both *Women at the Thesmophoria Festival* and *The Bacchae*, each of their unsuccessful portrayals suggest that the masculine cannot and should not achieve true understanding of the feminine. Their perceptions of ‘essential’ female behavior also reinforce an incredibly misogynistic, though very ancient Greek, view of women. Rather than showing how one successfully flouts the gender binary, this paper suggests that the portrayals of the unsuccessful cross-dresser in these plays drives a further gulf between the Greeks’ two genders and was meant to serve as both warning and ridicule of those who dared to cross it.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to contribute to the larger academic conversation on gender roles in Greek drama, showing that the behaviors and consequences faced by its cross-dressing characters reinforce and contribute to the ancient Greek gender binary.