From Chorus to Counterpoint: Carnivalesque Feminist Choreography in a "Rebel Makeover" of Aristophanes' Ecclesiazusae

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Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen* is a madcap hotchpotch of techniques and influences that bridges the gap between Old and Middle Athenian Comedy (Sutton 1990). Its revolutionary theme and miscellaneous structure naturally lend it to radical adaptation, and contemporary versions have sought to deconstruct its conservative satire by bringing out its feminist possibilities. A notable example is Women in Power (2018 Nuffield Southampton Theatres), an expanded translation of the *Ecclesiazusae*, directed by Blanche McIntyre and written by a diverse group of prominent female authors, comedians, poets and politicians. This adaptation provides the key example for our examination of feminist *détournements* of classic theatre on the contemporary stage. Specifically, we consider the importance of vocal diversity in collaborative authorship for feminist theatre translation. It is this authorial polyphony that has allowed recent productions of Athenian Comedy to develop carnivalesque counterpoints to the patriarchal norm of choric unison.

Keywords: adaptation; *Assemblywomen*; collaborative authorship; *détournement*; translation.

Suzanne Saïd says that Aristophanes' women "ne triomphent dans le jeu politique qu'en le dénaturant" (Saïd: 41). She is quite right. Perhaps inevitably, the Athenian dramatist conceives of political gender parity as perverse. The ribaldry of the context is important. Saïd is referring to a passage in *Ecclesiazusae* in which Praxagora's cohorts have just asked her how she will cope if the men in the assembly jostle her, or "butt in" (ὑποκρούωσίν) (*ECC.*: li. 256)[1] when she makes her (maid-

en) speech. The heroine jocularly misinterprets this as a threat of rape ("what if they *bang* you?") and responds that she will go along with it. This is not just a matter of lying back and thinking of Athens; she will enthusiastically "bang them back" (προσκινήσομαι), having "vast experience of beating the tackle of lots of different men" (*ECC.*: li. 258). It is not just her seductive rhetorical expertise, but a fantastic hypersexuality – the preposterous ability (and desire) to turn the tables on a gang rape – that will allow her to triumph on the Pnyx[2]. This kind of near-the-knuckle innuendo might be suited to a salacious modern drag queen (who would not be totally out of place in the carnivalesque festival of Dionysos, notwithstanding the obvious cultural anachronism [Damour: 36]), but the analogy only serves to bolster Saïd's identification of archaic sexism. Praxagora's venereal quip is a grotesque caricature of female political endeavour, but as such its implicit misogyny is a mere shadow of that of Aristophanes.

However, recent feminist adaptations of *ECC.* for the British stage reflect the genuine importance of a desire to change the nature of traditional patriarchal modes of interaction in the theatre of politics[3]. This goes hand in glove with the idea of feminist translation as a "rebel makeover": "a rewriting in the feminine", as Lotbinière-Harwood calls it[4], and therefore with the basic concept of *écriture féminine* (Cixous: 51). If deconstructing masculine politics is itself a valid political goal, then it is hardly surprising if feminist adaptations of *ECC.* also deconstruct its masculine poetics. After all, the play is posited on a comic breakdown of decorum resulting from a perversion of the patriarchy: the implicit *sine qua non* of Athenian democracy. An analysis of the most recent all-female "expanded translation"[5] of the play – *Women in Power* directed by Blanche McIntyre (Nuffield Southampton Theatres, 2018) – reveals how a collaborative form of "rebel makeover" has amplified the existing contrapuntal features of Aristophanes' comedy, developing their syncopations within the compositional space in such a way as to explode the conservative irony of the source text and extend its carnivalesque satire beyond the original cultural circumscriptions.

WIP was written by a team of prominent female authors, poets and comedians, based on director Blanche McIntyre's initial synoptic

translation of the Aristophanes play[6]. Each writer was responsible for a different section. Despite its polyvalence, and a glut of anachronistic jokes, it therefore follows the plot and setting of *ECC.* very closely, the only major difference being a coda: a talk-show interview in which Plato plugs his "new book" (*Republic*). The play was performed by an all-female cast and ran from 6 to 28 September 2018 at NST City theatre in Southampton. It met with generally favourable reviews. Tellingly, Michael Billington, writing in the *Guardian*, regretted only that the text stuck too closely to the original. He congratulated it for its creation of "a fantasy Greece" and called it "an evening of lewd fun", but said: "You could offer a straight version of the original or rewrite it totally in terms of today's world: this version seems torn between the two. […] I'd have been intrigued to see a version in which modern Westminster is taken over by women." (Billington 2018)

Before turning to this specific example, it is worth addressing the question of what is at stake in any stage-oriented translation of Attic comedy. More generally still: what is translation for the stage? Can it ever really be isolated from the overarching process of theatrical adaptation we call "staging"? Famously, Antoine Vitez turned this conundrum on its head: "traduire est déjà mettre en scène" (Vitez: 586). Even beyond the inherently multimodal context of theatre, theorists have sought to broaden the scope of the term "translation". If we remove the necessity for the process to involve more than one language (Jakobson: 233), or even, like Scott, a reader's inability to understand the source text (Scott: 1), then the sole premise of translation is the need to inscribe a shift in context. There is no such thing as a culturally neutral difference of context. Thus there is no such thing as a translation that is not a contextual repurposing posited on cultural non-equivalence. Any stage-oriented translation of archaic Athenian comedy requires a functional adaptation to its own theatrical culture and context of what is, in every sense, a topical text: a site-specific submission to an annual poetry competition, in a given historical year, to which it was thematically relevant, and in which its performance played both a structural role in the public life of the democracy and a ritual role in the Dionysian festival. "Let us begin by forgetting", says

Niall W. Slater (Slater: 207), exhorting us to ignore everything that has happened since 391 BCE before reading Aristophanes, including the imminent development of so-called Middle Comedy. Even if we wanted to, it would be impossible to reconstruct such a context for the contemporary Anglophone stage.

In the case of *ECC.*, the most salient difference is the source culture's total exclusion of women from the democracy. Only via religion – and a quasi-superhuman agency – could female Athenians play a significant role in public life. Even the admission of women to the audience of the theatre of Dionysos was an anomaly, probably attributable to a religious exception (McClure: 22). This is the structural premise of Aristophanes' earlier female-centred play, *Thesmophoriazusae*. The premise of *ECC.*, on the other hand, is the categorical separation of the sexes into exclusive spheres of social influence: male-*dêmos* / female-*dómos* – the democratic versus the domestic. The rigidity of this familiar dichotomy not only guarantees the purity of a supposed masculine virtuosity among the citizenry, it also seems to be a functional necessity for a participative democracy in which male citizens had to be freed from the onerous tasks of household management in order to perform their public duties. The ironic potential of this contradiction was clear to Aristophanes. How could men claim exclusive rule on the basis of innate superiority when they were reduced to a child-like dependence on their wives? This is the thrust of Praxagora's speech. While Aristophanes has no truck with the argument, and is ultimately satirising the apparent moral and intellectual weakness of the men who are swayed by it, much of the power of his comedy derives from the creation of a female character with the wit, the rhetorical skill, and the courage to convince the assembly to bring it to what he considers its logical conclusion: a fantastic socialist utopia of collective property and free love in which women are in charge of everything and men are left to sow their wild oats. Aptly, Praxagora's most effective trick is to sell political castration as a Dionysiac phallicisation.

For Aristophanes, it is seemingly the unification of structural societal dichotomies brought about by gender inversion, rather than gender inversion itself, that creates this comic predicament. The most

obvious of these is the separation of *dêmos* and *dómos*: the public and private spheres. Crucially, it is only within the carnivalesque space of the Dionysian festival – one of the rare public arenas in which large numbers of men and women mingled – that this kind of *mésalliance* (Bakhtin [1963] 1984: 123) could even be represented in Athens.

Another of these *mésalliances* occurs in the reflexive dichotomy of theatre and legislature. Hansen tells us that "the ecclesia held after the Greater Dionysia was the only regularly scheduled meeting of the assembly" (Hansen: 50). So the closure of the festival was invariably marked by a reestablishment of order by the *dêmos*, including the indemnification of inappropriate behaviour committed during the theatrical interlude. And this was held in the same *topos* as the ritual entertainments that had just turned social mores on their heads: the theatre of Dionysos.

A key feature of this restoration of decorum was, of course, the exclusion of women. So it is only natural that the distinction between theatre and *ecclesia* should also be threatened by the rebellious women in Aristophanes' play. *ECC.* is perhaps the most metatheatrical of the surviving archaic comedies[7]. The opening scene appears almost to anticipate Pirandello. The supposedly female actors help one another get into male costume and character before putting on a dress rehearsal of their revolutionary performance for the benefit of the otherwise redundant female chorus (ostensibly playing the other men in the assembly, but actually forming the front row of an onstage audience). The fact that the theatre for this performance will be the *ecclesia* is an uncanny feature of a comedy whose carnivalesque licence can only be justified if it derives from the circumscribed temporality of the festival, which is in turn only guaranteed by the ability of the male assembly to reaffirm democratic control of the theatrical space. What if that were inverted? What if (female) theatre broke its bonds and took control of the (male) democracy? This is the structural question at the heart of the play.

Clearly, many of these cultural concerns are not specifically relevant to the target audience of a contemporary British production. Women are no longer formally excluded from the UK parliament or from public life in general, nor does theatre rely on a temporary sus-

pension of order to grant it the licence to represent these kinds of things. Similarly, the separation of the domestic and political spheres along gendered lines is nowhere near as rigidly codified, despite its obstinate refusal to die a death. (Ironically, the politicisation of the private sphere is itself often seen as "woman's work", indicating an ingrained ideological demarcation of political discourses along gender lines.) Simply put, contemporary Britain is not a genuine patriarchy like archaic Athens. Nevertheless, the vestiges of patriarchal ideology and enduring material gender inequalities remain real political obstacles that all women have to confront. The core relevance of certain basic themes in *ECC.* to the social realities of the UK in the early 21st century is therefore obvious. One of the clearest similarities is the diversion of the private / public distinction in the discourse of female MPs. Jess Phillips, for example, (a collaborator on *WIP*) began her parliamentary career with these words:

> Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech. This is the first time I have been called a maiden, and it seems a little unusual as my children watch me from the Strangers Gallery [*sic*]. I assure everybody here that it is good that they are behind the glass — I can see them talking up there! (Hansard. HC Deb (28 May 2015) vol. 596, col. 264.)

From the initial self-referential joke "this is the first time I have been called a maiden" – a playful literalisation of a sexist metonym – the attention of the House is immediately diverted to call into question a different kind of metonymy: her children as tropes for a domestic and sexual reality she refuses to dissimulate (jokingly conceived as a *non-maidenhood*), which is simultaneously present and excluded in the "Strangers Gallery […] behind the glass", silenced by the teasingly transparent barrier. There is an element of ironic *denaturing* of conventional political discourse here, which is not unusual among recently elected female politicians, and finds several echoes in *ECC.*

However, it is clearly not an insistence on the domestic that is the most important feature of women's effect on masculine modes of political discourse. An increase in polyphony and diversity – counterpoints not just *of* the traditional conventions of discourse, but *with-*

in more polyphonic forms of dialogue – is one of the most notable changes brought about by women politicians in this period[8]. This has a direct link to the creative communicational possibilities of theatre, as embodied by the all-female adaptations of *ECC.* under analysis. A hint of this theatrical influence can already be seen in Phillips' speech, as it pushes the envelope of the conventions of parliamentary discourse. Not only is the reference to the glass around the public gallery "breaking the fourth wall" – mischievously recalling, with its pointed use of the obsolescent name, the theatrical parliamentary tradition of "I spy strangers" – it is also an ironic diversion of the codified address of parliamentary monologue. As a speech act, the interjection "I can see them talking up there!" plays with the conventional deictic expansion of the third person pronoun by simultaneously addressing the Deputy Speaker, "everybody here" and the children themselves, whom she is implicitly scolding. This represents a counterpoint to the formulaic speeches that have gone before, whilst simultaneously producing its own internal counterpoint of deixis and address. Rather than using that hackneyed expression "speaking as a working mum", Phillips is literally talking as a working mother… contrapuntally.

Aristophanes, despite his misogyny, foresees some of the contrapuntal potential in feminine political intervention. In his three plays about rebellious women, he develops this latent polyphony by extending it to the structural level of poetics. This makes these three texts structurally very open to feminist rewritings. Crucially, the effect includes a deconstruction of the paradramatic (diegetic) nature of the comic chorus, whose usually separate function is increasingly subsumed by the dialogic, mimetic and metatheatrical features of the drama. This is perhaps the most important carnivalesque *mésalliance* shared by all of Aristophanes' later plays, with the sole exception of *Bátrachoi* (*Frogs*). The effect culminates in the *coup de théâtre* cum theatrical *coup d'état* of *ECC.*, with its metatheatrical deconstruction of the democracy. The *parodos* (the opening procession of the chorus, which usually acts as a "curtain-raiser"), for example, is integrated into the first episode of the play: the metadramatic dress-rehearsal. The *agon* (formal debate) is subsumed in a plot-driven domestic squabble, in which the heroine

cunningly shifts from a farcical interaction with her husband – as she explains why she has been sneaking around at night in her husband's clothes, leaving him to go outdoors for a poo wearing her shawl and slippers – to a persuasive defence of the revolution she has just secretly triggered (*ECC.*: li. 478-729). Most importantly, the *parabasis* (the direct choric address to the audience) is erased. Aside from precluding the chorus from acting as an unmediated political mouthpiece for the author, this has the crucial dual effect of underlining its integration into the metatheatrical mimesis and of minimising the paradramatic commentary performed in unison.

Symbolically at least, this subsuming of the diegetic chorus into the dialogic mimesis of a radical metadrama suggests a more general attack on the female chorus's didactic function in the patriarchy. Claude Calame's 1977 study of the social role of choruses of adolescent girls, *Les Chœurs de jeunes filles en Grèce archaïque*, remains a standard reference[10]. Calame's most important conclusion is that the didactic function and the performative religious functions of female choruses in the period were inseparable:

> The chorus members learn and internalize a series of myths and rules of behaviour represented by the material taught all the more since archaic choral poetry has to be understood as a performative act, as a set of poems representing cult acts in precise ritual contexts. (Calame: 231)

So the performance of the choric aspects of Aristophanes' play, within its Dionysian ritual context, can be understood as the co-opting of the chorus of young women into the metatheatrical enactment of a female rebellion that undermines the didactic and ritual functions of the chorus itself. We begin to glimpse the deconstructive potential that *ECC.* might offer feminist rewriters: rebel makeover artists.

It must be acknowledged that this argument assumes a refusal to accept the standard historicist conclusion that the changing role of the chorus in *ECC.*, and the related structural shifts in poetics were primarily the result of a general theatrical evolution to what is now called Middle Comedy[11]. A knowledge of Aristophanes' surviving works seems sufficient to demonstrate that he saw the structural an-

nexation of the chorus as directly related to a female seizure of power. It is the anomaly of *Bátrachoi*, with its expanded *parabasis* (the standard example of Aristophanes' political conservatism), that provides the strongest evidence. Written after the much more anti-choric *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae* (and immediately before *ECC.*), *Bátrachoi* is as dominated by masculine characters and themes as it is chorus-heavy. The second half of the play takes the form of an *agon* between Aeschylus and Euripides, in Hades: a debate about whose choric compositions were literally *weightier*[12] when they were alive. As original as *Bátrachoi* undoubtedly is, its innovative poetics do not derive, like those of *ECC.,* from the revolutionary breakdown of the chorus's coherent identity, and thus of its distinct diegetic, paratextual, symbolic and social functions. In *ECC.*, Aristophanes appears to suggest, even more strongly than in his two earlier (and better known) women-centred comedies, that it is the dramatically contrapuntal effect of female empowerment that devolves the structure of the chorus. Moreover, he draws an explicit analogy between this and the explosive difference of female sexuality. Despite the literal phallocentrism on show, there is a foreshadowing here of the analogy drawn by Hélène Cixous between the contrapuntal pluralities of female sexuality and feminine discourse.

Regardless of whether this argument has any historical validity, it is an undeniably crucial feature of the adaptation under study: *Women in Power*. Not only is the basic correlation heavily implied in the structure of *WIP*, but the effect is radically extended. In only one of the five acts of this version is the chorus used in anything like the traditional way: as a group of unnamed representative citizens who cannot be seen or heard by the characters and who comment on the story, speaking in verse and in unison. Tellingly, the section in question is Act 2, written by Brona C. Titley, in which both the characters – Conjunctivitus and Bronchitus (alias Blepyrus and Chremes) – and the chorus members – "*a CHORUS of three extremely old men*" (*WIP*: 13) – are all male. The traditional parameters are clearly established in their first intervention:

> CONJUNCTIVITUS:… Is anybody here? Anybody at all?!
>
> CHORUS: Nobody here but three old men, hunched over in the cold,
> And you can't see us since we became invisible... by growing old. (*WIP*: 14)

However, the structural model has already been reflexively undercut by the preceding choric interlude, at the end of Act 1, in which the female chorus members discuss what to do next:

> W3: […] How about we pass the time pretending to be a Greek chorus?
> W1: Sure. Why not? (*WIP*: 13)

Furthermore, in only the fourth of the chorus's interventions in this act, the structure is diverted by an instantly recognisable feminist sarcasm that destabilises its putative masculinity. When Conjunctivitus exaggeratedly bemoans his constipation, they say: "Perhaps you could use a midwife? Some forceps? A birthing plan? / Or just go on about it for another hour... Typical man" (*WIP*: 15). From that point on, the choric commentary is mostly dominated by ironic references to their collective cross-dressing: "Hey, no judgement here, we feel a drag affinity, / And there's nothing more fucking fabulous than the performance of femininity" (*WIP*: 15); "It's quite the rant about gender bending from a man wearing slippers THAT fluffy" (*WIP*: 15); "If there's one thing we've learnt in our long masculine lives, / It's that comfortable clothes are far more valuable than wives" (*WIP*: 16). When the chorus learns from Bronchitus what has happened in the assembly, this deconstructive *drag chorus* culminates in an ironic victory chant that literalises its *écriture féminine* as an anatomically female choreography:

> CHORUS: The women are in charge!
> The women are in charge!
> Grab your pussy and shake your boobs!
> The women are in charge! (*WIP*: 17)

"En s'écrivant," says Cixous, "la femme fera retour à ce corps qu'on lui a plus que confisqué, dont on a fait l'inquiétant étranger dans la place" (Cixous: 45). If the audience are implicitly encouraged – by the use of the generic imperative and the traditional intermediary role of the chorus – to join in with this ironic choreography, then male audience members could only do so via their own mental gender bending. Such "pussy grabbers" would be using their (little?) hands to carry out an act of symbolic self-castration. Thus the male (audience)

members would become the uncanny outsiders to which Cixous alludes. As fun as it is, this kind of parodic chorus – with its anachronistic topical allusions[13] – is an example only of thematic counterpoint. **If it produces syncopations, then they are entirely abstract, dealing with anachronies.** The structure remains homophonic. The voices literally speak in unison. It is the extension of this effect to create a structural, compositional polyphony – a pluralisation of its choreography – that is the most innovative characteristic of *WIP*.

The effect takes many forms. The songs, written by Tim Sutton, for example, range from parodies of the lyrical soliloquies of musical theatre ("Come hither my beautiful sieve", *WIP*: 32), to a conversational form that resembles a kind of postmodern comic opera in its stylised developments of dialogue. Only the opening song "Aristotle" (Tim Sutton, *WIP*: 1-2) and Wendy Cope's "Sneaking home" (sung by the "Chorus of returning 'men'", *WIP*: 19) are traditionally choric, in the sense that they are homophonic and heterodiegetic. The integration of the songs into the dramatic action reaches its peak in the second half of Act 4a, written by Suhayla El-Bushra, in which the song "Why should I?" (*WIP*: 36-40) is almost an extended recitative: a mixture of sung and spoken lines, including dialogue between and amongst characters and the chorus.

However, it is less the integration of the action into the choric elements than its opposite – the integration of a wide range of choric elements into the action – that is most notable in *WIP*. In the opening of Act 1, by Natalie Haynes, for example, the choric function is performed by "a shadowy figure with some EXPLANATORY PLACARDS" (*WIP*: 2). These immediately set up an anachronic frame of reference: "PLACARD: 391 BCE / PLACARD: Or as we like to call it, the present day." (*WIP*: 2) Soon we learn that this "shadowy figure" does not stand outside the mimetic action, but is actually one of the women assembled by Strategia (Praxagora) in 391 BCE. She is referred to as "Placardia" and, while she remains silent, only expressing herself verbally by holding up her placards, she does take part in the meeting. Meanwhile, her placards take on a comic glossary function, the humour of which derives from a pointedly anachronistic topicality, em-

phasising the glaring discrepancy between the site-specific context of the original play and the cultural context of the expanded translation. Crucially, the placards are used as an ironic mechanism of clarification for translation difficulties. When Strategia complains about the "local MP Phyromachus" getting paid "a triobolus – a whole day's pay – just for showing up at the Athenian Assembly", the placards counterpoint the heroine's gloss with two of their own "PLACARD: Or four London gin and tonics) […] PLACARD: Triobolus – 500 points on your Tesco club card!)" (*WIP*: 2-3)

Predictably perhaps, this integration of anachrony is a shared feature of almost all the choric iterations in the play. Not only is there a constant ironic insistence on historical anachronism – with references to "Colin from accounting" (8), "the Times and the Telegraph" (10), "Theresa's cabinet" (16), text messages (20), "Phillip Schofield" (21), "millennials" (26), "the NHS (47), and so on – but there is also constant metadramatic (and metatranslational) commentary on the structural problems of adaptation. For example, in Act 4b, written by the company as a whole, a choric character called Metaxa intervenes to complain about the sexual objectification of men, using arguments that highlight internal inconsistencies: "METAXA: But she also in Scene 4 said 'men and women would have equal status'." (*WIP*: 46); and the characters come around to her metatextual way of thinking: "ANTHRAXA: You cannot use that word, Strategia banned it in Scene 4!" More comically, proleptic elements in the choric interludes repetitively pre-empt the final scene. One of its members keeps demanding to eat:

> W1: […] that amazing dish that only we Athenians in 391BC have.
>
> W2: The one with the stupidly long name? […]
>
> W3: What's wrong with you? It's not time for that yet. That comes later in the play. (*WIP*: 12-13)

> CHORUS: Lopado-Temacho-Selano-Galeo-Kranio-Leipsano-Drim-Hypotrimmato- Shut up! You shut up. I'm starving. (*WIP*: 18)

The abstract thematic syncopations identified in Act 2 are thus extended into the genuine structural syncopations of anachrony, rhythm

and tone in the choric elements disseminated throughout the rest of the play. The resulting counterpoint is not merely polyphonous, in the sense of being multivocal and non-homophonic, it is also conceptually and dramaturgically heterogeneous.

The question of how to handle the nexus of society and poetics in the staging of a chorus – especially with regard to cultural conceptions of the individual and the collective voice – is always a problem for contemporary adaptations of Attic theatre. Alison Burke's study of modern productions based on new translations of Greek tragedy reveals this to be particularly true for female choruses. She delineates a wide range of dramaturgical conceptions, which she groups into four structural categories:

> [T]he chorus as a single archetypal figure (TAG [Theatre About Glasgow]'s *Antigone*); the chorus as a disembodied entity (Theatre Cryptic's *Electra*); the chorus composed of individuals within a group identity (Deborah Warner's *Medea*); and finally, the chorus as a unified group identity (theatre babel's *Medea*) (Burke 2002).

At various points in its dramaturgy *WIP* arguably employs all four of these categories – the choric stand-up routine of Act 5, by Jenny Éclair, is an example of the first; the placards in Act 1 an example of the second; the arguments about *lopado-temacho...* the third; and the ironic drag chorus in Act 2 is a parody of the fourth. In fact, there is a great deal more contrapuntal complexity at work than is suggested by this mere iteration. *WIP* is a joyfully transgressive hotchpotch of devolved choric interactions: a choreographic salmagundi to rival the absurdly-named gargantuan dish with which Aristophanes foreshadows Rabelaisian carnival. This is of course a function of the adaptation's plural composition.

There is an obvious conclusion to be drawn. The explosion of the chorus that this "rebel makeover" has triggered extends to, or rather from, the collaborative writing space. It is only natural that the various conceptions of the Attic female chorus, and how it might be staged in twenty-first century Britain, are heterogeneous in this translation, given that the translation itself is so expansive and promiscuous. This

is an expanded translation of *ECC.* by "a chorus of women writers", in a cultural context (twenty-first century Britain) in which it is only natural for such a chorus to be neither "individual" nor "collective", but contrapuntal. If the source text asks the question: *what happens if a female chorus stages a dramatic takeover of the democracy?* this adaptation responds with a similarly reflexive answer: *a female chorus stages a dramatic takeover of classical theatre.* This is what we mean by a "rebel makeover". It is also a "takeover".

The structural contrapuntality at work in this *coup de traduction* is arguably written into Cixous' theory of *écriture féminine*, upon which Lotbinière-Harwood's feminist translation theory is based. After setting out her stall in seemingly universalising terms – "Il faut que la femme s'écrive" – Cixous multiplies the vocal and creative possibilities of this writerly self-determination by expanding "la femme" beyond even the expected grammatical structure of the French plural: "que la femme écrive de la femme et fasse venir les femmes à l'écriture, dont elles ont été éloignées aussi violemment qu'elles l'ont été de leurs corps" (Cixous: 37). This is a crescendo of plurality. Within its possessive syntax, "leurs corps" suggests that each of the women to be (translating literally) "made to come to writing" not only has their own individual body, but in fact has multiple (estranged) bodies, which they both share and do not share. And it is from this sense of reclaiming an estranged corporeal counterpoint – an interwoven bodily plurality – that *écriture féminine* conceptually derives. The same might be said of the choreography of contemporary female comedy.

Seen in this light, feminist efforts to change the nature of political theatre can be understood as part of a broader tendency to *re*-nature, rather than to *de*-nature, the theatre of politics. Despite a culturally determined antipathy to feminism, this is something Aristophanes would probably have understood. The basic approach appears to match the central tenet of his own political poetics. This is why *Women in Power* works as an expanded translation, notwithstanding its promiscuous infidelity. Were this infidelity to be considered "domesticating" – on the highly dubious grounds that it imposes the anachronistic norms of contemporary feminist ideology[14] – the irony (if not hypoc-

risy) of such a topsy-turvy application of Venuti's politically inflected term would not be lost on the author of *Ecclesiazusae*, whose satire of female power hinges on the carnivalesque victory of *dómos* over *dêmos*.

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1 The standard Greek text of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* is referred to as *ECC.* throughout this article; references are given by line number. *Women in Power*, the expanded translation by Blanche McIntyre *et al.*, is *WIP*.

2 The Pnyx is the Athenian hill where most meetings of the assembly were held.

3 Besides *Women in Power* (McIntyre *et al.*), the other most recent adaptation of *ECC.* for an all-female cast is Máirín O'Hagan's *The Assembly Women*, produced by Boireannach Theatre at the VAULT Festival in London in 2016. This version resembles *WIP* in some ways – primarily its boosted metadramatic features – but its basic approach is a much looser transposition to a context of contemporary British politics. The women involved are the wives (and a nanny) of a fictional British Prime Minister and his cabinet. *WIP*, conversely, keeps the original setting and characters.

4 "Rebel makeover" is an attempt to capture some of the ambiguity in Lotbinière-Harwood's term *re-belle*. Her title is a play on the French translation studies cliché, *la belle infidèle* (the prettified translation compared to a beautiful but unfaithful wife), popularised by Georges Mounin.

5 "Expanded translation" is a term that has gained recent prominence in Translation Studies (see, for example, *Poetry Wales*, Spring 2018, 53.3, "Poetry in Expanded Translation", edited by Zoë Skoulding). It names a set of multimodal, evolutive translation practices that are poorly served by (often pejorative) terms like "adaptation" or "transposition", traditionally applied to more liberal forms of repurposing (like O'Hagan's *The Assembly Women*). Whenever we refer to *WIP* as a "translation", this is to be understood as shorthand for "expanded translation".

6 We are very grateful to Blanche McIntyre and her other collaborators for giving us permission to use the rehearsal draft of *WIP*. The prominent writers who participated in the project were: Wendy Cope, Jenny Éclair, Suhayla El-Bushra, Shappi Khorsandi, Jess Phillips, and Brona C Titley. Songs were composed by Tim Sutton.

7 Slater makes a strong case for understanding Aristophanes' penchant for metatheatre as part and parcel of his political approach to comedy. It is *Thesmophoriazusae* that is usually identified as the most theatrically reflexive play, but

Slater suggests *ECC.* to be more "revolutionary" (Slater: 207) in this sense than either of the previous female-centred comedies, precisely because it is "the theatre of politics" – more than either the theatre or politics themselves – that is for him the core object of Aristophanic self-referentiality.

[8] See Blaxill and Beelen for a cogent statistical analysis of how women MPs have engendered a slow linguistic sea-change in UK parliamentary debates since 1945.

[9] "I spy strangers" is an obsolete parliamentary convention in the UK which, until its removal from the standing orders in 2004, used to allow MPs to filibuster debates by calling for the public gallery to be cleared. The words ostensibly identify the presence of a suspicious interloper, or literally a spy.

[10] The other main advocate of the didactic theory of the archaic chorus is Winkler, who concentrates on the specifically masculine and militaristic "ephebic" choruses of tragedy (Winkler: 57-8). Wilson's is perhaps the most persuasive rebuttal of this theory (Wilson: 77-9).

[11] The argument against the Middle Comedy explanation for Aristophanes' choric devolution in these plays seems to garner some support from both Slater's suggestion that we "begin by forgetting" (Slater: 207) and Shaw's problematisation of the linear historicity of the term "Middle Comedy" itself (Shaw: 2).

[12] Lines from the choric poetry of the two great tragedians are literally weighed against one another on a pair of scales.

[13] "Grab your pussy" is an obvious reference to Donald Trump, for example.

[14] To be clear, we are not suggesting that Venuti would call *WIP* "domesticating". Being wary of the concept of "expanded translation" (see Zoë Skoulding's article "Poetry in Expanded Translation – an update" on the Poetry Wales website: https://poetrywales.co.uk/wp/3336/poetry-in-expanded-translation-an-update), he would probably consider *WIP* beyond the realms of translation-proper. He would nevertheless be more likely to consider *WIP* politically "foreignizing" as an adaptation. This is because feminism remains marginal. The idea that it is part of a dominant culture, imposed by a left-wing liberal elite, is a cruel inversion of its own logic. However, this **idea** is increasingly prevalent in anti-feminist arguments, and serves as a pretext for abusing prominent women. In this political climate, it does not seem at all fanciful to imagine an equally inverted application of the term "domesticating" to *WIP*.