

Arden Frantzen

Jo Nixon

Greek and Roman Texts

April 25, 2022

### Interruption and Insurrection:

An analysis of the comedic trope of interruption in *Women of the Assembly*

Aristophanes' *Women of the Assembly* offers a timeless and colorful satire on Athenian politics and generally derides female leadership and autonomy. Nevertheless, while women are often the laughing stock of the play, their rise to power through the female character, Praxagora, cannot be overlooked. Praxagora initially presents as a woman who must disguise herself as a man just to enter the strictly male political assembly. From there, she survives a litany of obstacles to emerge eventually as a powerful authority figure known as the "Great Protectress." Her surprising rise to power is demonstrated through a comedic trope of relentless barrages of interruptions when other characters attempt to speak or otherwise assert their authority. Through artfully timed interruption of others, manipulative staging, demeaning insults, as well as an overwhelming refusal to be interrupted herself, Praxagora effectively controls speech to transform herself into a terrifying embodiment of the law as the "Great Protectress."

First, Praxagora artfully times multiple interruptions that afford her complete control of ideas circulating among the assembly because speakers are prevented from completing any compelling statements and opinions that Praxagora might not like. For example, Praxagora quickly curbs the Second Woman's view on water kegs at bars with the interruption, "Just stop speaking" (309). Similarly, as soon as the Second Woman utters, "In my opinion, ladies of the Assembly—" (309), Praxagora interjects so that the audience never gets to hear the opinion. In all of these cases, Praxagora blames her ongoing interruptions on trivialities such as allegedly

citing the “wrong” god or goddess, asking for a drink out of protocol, or addressing the assemblywomen as ‘ladies’ when they are dressed as men. Such rhythmic interruptions for nonsensical reasons underscores a hilarious opening to the play while the audience repeatedly witnesses Praxagora deftly frustrating every attempt by every character who takes the stage and tries to make a point. Beyond the comedic satisfaction of the truncated colloquies, the interruptions establish Praxagora’s control over conversations and indirectly sets a precedent that precise wording is more significant than general sentiment. Praxagora’s obsession with specific wording eventually transpires into a dangerous, blind following of her word of law, without any questioning of the morality behind it. Eventually this culminates in the Second Old Woman’s terrifying justification for sexual assault: “It is the law, not me, that drags you off” (368). Therefore, Praxagora masterfully interrupts speakers for trivial reasons in order to control circulating opinions and to lay the foundation for her authoritative success that relies on strict, unquestioning adherence to precise wording of the law.

Along with intentional timing that prevents speakers from sharing opinions, Praxagora controls speech by manipulatively staging her interruption in a facade of encouragement. She generously invites women to the stage with supportive words of “Step up and speak loudly, manfully” (308) as well as grandiose gestures where she offers away the symbolic garland to any new speaker on the podium. In all of this, she manipulates the women into believing that they have a voice in the assembly meeting, when in reality, they have no voice whatsoever. Praxagora neither lets them step up, nor speak loudly. Further, she physically removes the garland from the Second Woman through explicit stage directions, ignoring its symbolic representation as indicator of the speaker (309). Therefore, Praxagora’s masterful subterfuge of false generosity before employing the trope of interruption allows her to manipulate the assemblywomen into

believing incorrectly that they have opinions which matter. Consequently, the women are blind to Praxagora's censorship that buttresses her confident ascent to power.

Praxagora occasionally breaks this facade of encouragement strategically with a stark contrast of demeaning interruptions that elevate herself over the rest of the assemblywomen. By repeatedly interjecting to call women "idiots" (308), rhetorically asking "what were you thinking?" (308), and mocking ideas with "what's this 'don't they drink?'" (307), she sets herself apart from the rest of the women who can never seem to earn her approval. In a matter of lines, Praxagora establishes the superiority of her opinions such that the other women idolize her, respect her opinion, and willingly listen to her speech when she finally ascends the platform and puts on the garland to offer her own thoughts and words. Even as she prepares to speak, Praxagora continues her visage of superiority over the crowd by opening her remarks with, "I'd better put on this garland here and give the speech myself" (309). Therefore, Praxagora's choice to break the facade of encouragement with starkly contrasting insults elevates her status and supports her unquestionable leadership.

As Praxagora continues her adventure of interruptions and manipulations that support her authority, she overwhelmingly refuses to be interrupted herself---even if she is interrupted with a compliment. In fact, every time that the First Woman interjects Praxagora's speech with sweet comments of "By Aphrodite, you expressed that well!"(310), "This man is wise!" (311), and "Well said, by Zeus! Well said!" (312), Praxagora sweeps aside the compliment and stays focused on her speech, even having two explicit stage directions to "contin[ue] her speech" (311). Notably, she is the only character in the entire play with these stage directions, which she has nearly every time that she is interrupted. However, when she is not given stage directions to finish speaking, other characters force her to continue, including the Second Woman who begs,

“Please, sir, continue” (312), as well as the Neighbor, who snaps at Blepyrus, “Excuse me— let the lady speak” (333). In the latter instance, she continues exactly where she previously left off before the interruption, as denoted in the text by an ellipsis that opens her next dialogue (344). Lastly, when she has neither stage directions or outside characters that let her continue speaking, she is not afraid to stand up for herself. For example, when her husband is not yet convinced of her idealistic plan to create an equal society for all, Praxagora pleads, “No, no, you cut me off too soon...” (335). Eventually, she speaks long enough to convince him of her plan. Therefore, Praxagora’s hypocritical refusal to be interrupted, through stage direction, outside characters, and autonomous assertion, are means by which she controls speech and the ideas that circulate. This proves successful as she convinces the assembly women, then the neighbor, and finally her husband, of her radical plans to completely turn society upside-down and make an equal utopia for everyone.

Overall, Praxagora’s use of the comedic trope of interruption fuels her rise to power and ultimate title as the “Great Protectress.” She effectively truncates speakers, emphasizes the importance of the word of the law, manipulatively fabricates a false facade of encouragement, demeans her subjects with insulting interjections, yet refuses to be interrupted herself. Although it proves effective and must not be overlooked, she fails to use her power well. She dismantles the law into pieces, then reassembles them into a tool for her own control of everybody she meets. For men, this means forcing them to have unwanted sex with women deemed unattractive and elderly as well as blindly surrendering all possessions to the state. With this terrifying ending, Aristophanes timelessly warns his audience to remain vigilant of politicians that may employ effective censorship tactics like tropes of interruption for subtle yet dangerously effective outcomes nonetheless.