

CLCS4009

READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY
OF ANCIENT LITERATURE



Lecture 9: Greek
Comedy: Fantasy
and Reality:

Old Comedy:
Aristophanes'
Lysistrata

Dr. Crystal Addey

Reminder: Essays

- 1500 word essay to be submitted by **Tuesday, 27th November 2011 by 3pm.**
- **EITHER**
- 1] Examine the portrayal of the bard Demodocus in Homer's *Odyssey* Book 8. What evidence is there that Demodocus composed his songs orally? **OR**
- 2] Discuss the similarities and differences between Greek Old Comedy and Greek New Comedy, with reference to at least one play of Aristophanes and one play of Menander.

Reminder: Essays

- **OR**

- 3] Analyse the roles of the gods and religion in Euripides' *Bacchae* or in Hesiod's *Theogony* .

- **OR**

- 4] Examine the connections between literature and philosophy in **either** Aristotle's *Poetics* **OR** Plato's *Symposium*.

- **Lectures this week:** Old and New Comedy: Aristophanes and Menander

- **Lectures next week:** Aristotle's *Poetics* and Plato's *Symposium*

Origins of Comedy

- City Dionysia: 486 BC
- Lenaea: granted competition status in 440s BC
- Aristotle *Poetics* 1448b29-1449b20:
 - Homeric origins: *Margites*
 - Develops from “the phallic songs”
 - Shared much originally with *iambos*

Comedy Labels

- **Old Comedy (Attic Comedy or Aristophanic Comedy):**
 - Eupolis, Cratinus and Aristophanes; c. 440-385 BC
- **Middle Comedy [fragments]**
 - Platon and Antiphanes; c. 385-320 BC
- **New Comedy**
 - Menander; c. 325-290 BC

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.)

- Themes of peace versus war: Is the play a serious plea for peace? (the play will be briefly contrasted with Aristophanes' *Archarnians*, another comedy about peace and war).
- The historical context of the play
- The combination of political themes with gender conflict and sexual comedy
- Plot problems and inconsistencies
- Lysistrata as the first female comic protagonist

Aristophanes' Peace Plays

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ARISTOPHANES ACHARNIANS



*Edited with Introduction and
Commentary by*
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ARISTOPHANES PEACE



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ARISTOPHANES LYSISTRATA

Translation with Introduction and Notes
Jeffrey Henderson

Historical Context



- 411 BC; Lenaea
 - 415-413 BC: Sicilian expedition
 - Occupation of Decelea
 - Revolting or defecting allies
- Persian involvement
- Alcibiades and Peisander

Lysistrata the comic protagonist

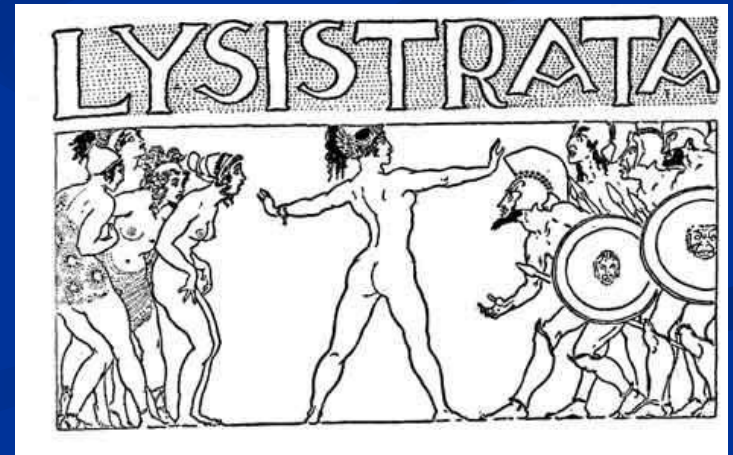
Many have seen the appearance of Lysistrata in the comedy of 411 as a watershed in the comic depiction of women:

“...there are no earlier examples of a female protagonist like Lysistrata...female speaking parts in earlier plays are personifications...figures from mythology...or relatives of prominent men.”
(Henderson, 1987, xxviii)

In comedies that we can date before 411, no obvious ancestor for Lysistrata

Structure: the Triple Plot

- Prologue (1-253)
- Plot 1: occupation of Acropolis (254-705)
- Plot 2: sex-strike (706-1013)
- Reconciliation (1014-end)
- Plot 3?
 - Battle of the sexes: the choruses.
 - Reconciliation
 - Narrative vs. Structure



Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*: Some problems / inconsistencies

- a/ The plot requires us to assume that consensual marital sex is the only kind of sex available to the Athenian male (or only kind that would give him worthwhile satisfaction). Slaves, prostitutes and boys are basically ignored. This is illogical - but it can be argued that the fact that it works at all suggests at least that marital sex, enjoyed by both, was thought to be an important part of men's lives as well as women's.

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*: Some problems / inconsistencies (2)

- b/ The plot requires us to assume that women are, or can be persuaded to be, better able than men to endure sexual deprivation – and it was an article of faith with virtually all Greek males that the reverse was the case. Cf. Martha Nussbaum, “The Comic Soul: Or, This Phallus that is not One,” in V. Pedrick and S.M. Oberhelman, *The Soul of Tragedy: Essays on Athenian Drama* (Chicago, 2005).
- Alan Sommerstein: the success of *Lysistrata*'s scheme was can only be explained (in the average spectator's view) by divine support. Aphrodite ensures that the men are brought to the last stage of physical desperation. Athena (through her agent *Lysistrata*) strengthens the women to endure abstention from sex.

Logical Difficulties

- 99ff.:
- Lys: The fathers of your children –don't you miss them when they're away at war? I know not one of you has a husband at home.
- Cal: I know, my dear. My husband has been away for five months, five months my dear, in Thrace I think ...
- Myr: And mine has been in Pylos for the last seven months.

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*: a serious plea for peace?

- 1/ Figure of Lysistrata is more consistently serious and concerned for the city's good than Dikaiopolis in the *Archarnians*:
- a) Throughout the play, she organises a group, keeps them in order and presents better arguments to the men, and is authoritative, intelligent, controlled and politically effective.
- b) Her name and character recall the priestess of Athena Polias called Lysimache- a living woman who has a very similar name - and she knows the Acropolis well, refers a lot to civic cults, etc. Reinforced by fact that a woman called Myrrhine was also the priestess of Athena Nike – though in the play Myrrhine's character is not so serious.

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*: a serious plea for peace? (2)

- 2/ The City's troubles seem far worse - long war, serious sufferings in families.
- 3/ There is also a Panhellenic element (quite absent from *Archarnians*). *Lysistrata* gets women from all over Greece to participate in the sex-strike; all Greece is suffering in the same way.
- 4/ On women, we see a combination of crude stereotypes of anti-women jokes - with quite a lot of quite serious points about the political disasters and corruption of the men in charge, and the sufferings of the women because of the war.

Political Seriousness? The First Agon

567ff.:

Lys: Well, consider how we deal with a tangled skein of wool. We take it like this, and with the help of our spindles we pull it gently, now in this direction, now in that, and it all unravels. That's how we'll unravel this war, if you'll let us, unpicking it by sending diplomatic missions, now in this direction, now in that.



Politics and the Reconciliation

(1122ff): Lys: Now you Spartans stand right next to me on this side, and you Athenians on that side, and listen to what I have to say. I am a woman, but I'm not a fool: I have my share of native wit, and also I've often heard my father's conversations with other older men. Now, listen, both: my words to you are harsh –but you deserve them, you worship the same gods at the same shrines, use the same lustral water, just as if you were a single family –at Olympia, Delphi, Thermopylae –how many more could I make mention of, if it were needed? And yet, though threatened by barbarian foes, you ruin Greece's towns and slay her men. Here ends the first part of my argument.

Questions?



Follow-up Reading

- Dover, K. J. *Aristophanic Comedy*. London: Batsford, 1972, pp. 30-65.
- Nussbaum, M. “The Comic Soul: Or, This Phallus that is not One,” in V. Pedrick and S.M. Oberhelman, *The Soul of Tragedy: Essays on Athenian Drama* (Chicago, 2005).
- Segal, E. (ed.) *Oxford Readings in Aristophanes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, esp. chapters 4, 7 and 8.

Reading for next week

- For next Thursday, please read some of:
- **Aristotle's *Poetics* (as much as possible)**
- Aristotle, *Poetics*. Tr. M. Heath, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1996 (the introduction and commentary of this edition is useful).
- Halliwell, S. *Aristotle's Poetics*. London, Duckworth: 1986 (note this is different to his translation and commentary of 1987).
- **Plato's *Symposium* (as much as possible)**