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SEXUAL HUMOR AND HARMONY IN *LYSISTRATA*

By JAY M. SEMEL

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, as does most Greek drama, focuses on persons moving in the face of adversity toward a definition of self and social role. Invariably this entails the testing of one's capacity to reconcile individual human desires, passions, and instincts with that combination of abstract principles and pragmatic political expediencies demanded by society for the maintenance and well-being of the State. In *Lysistrata*, the reconciliation is extraordinarily successful: the Peloponnesian War is stopped and Panhellenic unity achieved solely because of the need to satisfy sexual desires. In fact, this self-fulfillment generates a far-reaching harmony leading to the restoration of the family, the polis, the entire Greek world, and finally the gods themselves.

The first lines of the play, which call for "a debauch in honor of Bacchos,"¹ immediately underline the constant emphasis on sexuality, and the specific reference to Bacchos—or Dionysus, as he is often known—recalls the context for the performance: the play is given at the Theatre of Dionysus during the Athenian Festival of Dionysus. The festival was a holiday, a time to escape normal routine and responsibility, to revel and drink and dance, and to indulge one's humanity; but here, as in the dramatic process described earlier, individual pleasure led to more noble ends: the festival honored a god, it demonstrated the patriotism of the Athens community, and it ushered in a new season of the year. And the comedies performed as part of the festival incorporated a similar process. On stage, men mocked themselves and the State. They were raunchy and ribald. They played female roles or exaggerated their own maleness by sporting yard-long leather phalluses. However, by the conclusion, the jokes, the mocking, and the grotesqueries

¹ Douglass Parker, trans., *Lysistrata* (New York: New American Library, 1970). All subsequent references to this work appear in the text of the paper.

would evolve into a reassertion of human value and classical order.

A brief recounting of the myth of Dionysus's origins sheds considerable light, albeit a rather ironic light, on the thematic concerns of *Lysistrata*. Dionysus was a child of the great god Zeus and of the mortal woman Semele. After the baby had been conceived, Semele, encouraged by jealous Hera, demanded that Zeus, who hitherto had remained invisible, expose himself to her. He did reveal his full glory, but the sight of the overwhelming godhead was too much for Semele: legend has it that she was annihilated by the thunderbolt emitted from his presence. Zeus then reached into her remains to retrieve the fetus, and, assuming a maternal role, implanted it in his thigh, finally giving birth to Dionysus when he was full term. Needless to say, the notion of male supremacy, potency, and responsibility embodied in the myth is sharply ridiculed in the drama.

More important than providing cultural or mythic connections, the first lines of the play serve to characterize the nature of women and to define Aristophanes' comic method:

Women!

Announce a debauch in honor of Bacchos,
a spree for Pan, some footing fertility Fieldday,
and traffic stops—the streets are absolutely clogged
with frantic females banging on tambourines. No
urging for an orgy!

But *today*—there's not one woman here (p. 16). Here, Lysistrata, the title figure of the play and the leader of the women's revolt, is complaining about and making fun of her colleagues' concern for the trivial and the physical when more important matters are at hand. Women, who need no urging for an orgy but who are late for a meeting called of all wives of soldiers fighting the war, obviously lack any sense of political responsibility. Of course, under Lysistrata's direction, the women do come and get organized, initiate and emerge victorious from the war of the sexes, and end the Peloponnesian War. But in spite of their triumphs, the women never abandon their original "trivial" interest in sex. All of the incredible diplomatic achievements come only because the women want

to make love with their husbands all of the time, and not just when the men are home on furlough.

Much of the drama's humor is founded on the women actually affirming the female stereotype. They never really change into soldiers or politicians; they simply assert their femininity. Lysistrata even goes so far as to tell Kleonike that she would be happy if only they could live up to the slanderous male view of women as sly, deceitful monsters of intrigue. And, significantly, the intrigues she has in mind are necessary to gain human pleasure. The issue at hand is not some vague principle, but something "immense," "pressing," "unthinkably tense," so important that Lysistrata has spent sleepless nights "kneading it, mulling it, filing it down" (p. 17). Similarly, Keonike advises against the annihilation of the enemy city-state of Boeotia, not out of a sense of diplomacy or even of compassion, but because she enjoys eating the eels that come from there, eels which nicely suggest her sexual interests as well.

To insure a permanent access to eels and to their men, Lysistrata proposes that the women from all over Greece form an alliance to work for peace. Kleonike, doubtful about the enterprise, observes that women lack practicality and wisdom: "There's nothing cosmic about cosmetics—and Glamour is our only talent" (p. 18). But Lysistrata realizes that feminine accoutrements are not a weakness, but a strength: "slippers and slips, rouge and perfumes, negligees and décolletage" can be used in a wise, practical way and can even achieve cosmic results (p. 19). She then announces her plan to have the women accentuate their womanliness, entice their husbands, and then deny their husbands. And in denying their husbands, the women are rejecting the fragmented lives the war has forced on them. If they cannot have the whole, neither can their men. Lysistrata knows that a married man "wants harmony—cooperation" (p. 28).

The link between womanliness, sexuality, wholeness is the point of that scene which occurs when the women arriving at the meeting inspect each newcomer's body. Lampito's complexion, figure, and bosom are praised; and as she is flatteringly fondled, she is accused of and admits to being healthy and

strong enough to strangle a bull. Ismenia arrives and her body becomes representative of her cultivated family and her country. She is the image of picturesque Boeotia; her verdant meadows, her fruited plain," and "her sunken garden where no grass grows. A cultivated country" (p. 22). In similar fashion, when Lampito says of a Lorinthian girl that "her kinfolk's quality—mighty big back there," Kleonike, inspecting the girl's behind, observes, "She's mighty big back *here*" (pp. 22-23). In short, the women's bodies reflect their strength, their ancestry, and their country. Similarly, the peace ultimately attained in the play will be embodied by a beautiful young woman.

The women, who miss their husbands and realize that lovers are now impossible to come by and that even leather do-it-yourself kits are no longer available, are a little reluctant to give up the little sex they do have when the husbands manage a furlough; but they soon assent wholeheartedly to Lysistrata's scheme. They take an oath swearing to "withhold all rights of access or entrance/from every husband, lover, casual acquaintance" (p. 32); but unlike the men, who usually slaughter an animal to take a blood oath on their shields, the women use domestic ceramic pots filled with wine. Blood, sacrifices, and shields lead to blood, sacrifice, and war, whereas wine gives human pleasure. And should the women fail, they have no intention of falling on their swords: they'll just settle for drinking water. The scene may poke fun at women who do not lend the proper dignity to serious matters, but its sharpest barb is aimed squarely at the values of men and of a society which considers serious only that which is destructive or painful.

To put it in the proper perspective, the scene is switched to the Temple of Athene at the Akropolis, where a chorus of old women is bravely defending the gates against an onslaught of old men. The difficulty the men have keeping their torches lit and their logs up comments on their impotency, but the men's assault on the Temple also clarifies the nature of the war they have been fighting over the last several years. Above all, the Peloponnesian War is an attack on Athene and everything she represents. The men have exhausted the treasury there, having

used the money for their futile military endeavors. It is a war on Greece, because the combatants are Greek city-states. It is a war against women, for ultimately it is they and their children who have suffered. And, of course, it is a war against the deity Athene, goddess of Wisdom, which is to say the men are fighting a sacrilegious and stupid war.

The men lack the wisdom and the ability to win because in both the battle between the sexes and in the all-encompassing Peloponnesian War (throughout the drama, the little war mirrors and trivializes the big one) they are fighting for the wrong things. The men call out for "victory, male supremacy . . . and a testimonial plaque" (p. 40), while the women pray for salvation "from battles, insanity, Man's inhumanity" (p. 41). This contrast is also reflected in their choice of weapons: whereas the men possess torches and battering rams, the women employ the defensive agent of water contained in household pitchers. The water and pitchers carry obvious sexual overtones, especially as they put out the male torches, but they bear other associations as well. When the old men's leader scoffs at the idea that his fire can be doused, he is answered by his woman counterpart, "You'll see when the facts soak in" (p. 44). A few lines later, she says that she will give him a bath "pure enough for a blushing bridegroom." And when the men are thoroughly inundated, and indignantly inquire what the women think they're doing, the response is: "If you must know, I'm gardening. Perhaps you'll bloom" (p. 45). So the women's weapon—the water—is equated with the truth, the purification of a marriage ceremony, the growth and fertility of the garden. Certainly these elements are not associated with traditional military spirit, and that's exactly the point. The women's alternative to traditional warfare is not just something silly or pleasant; it is quite effective. The old women win.

In spite of all, the claim is made that the women have no say in civil matters and have no stake in the war. To this, the leader of the women's chorus offers a strong rebuttal: "I hold stock in Athens—stock I paid for in sons" (p. 66). In fact, the women insist that it is they who have borne the greatest burden of the war: their sons have died; the married women

have wasted the best years of their lives, and young virgins have had "nothing to do but grow old" (p. 62); and feasts in honor of Hekate, the goddess of childbirth, have been spoiled (p. 68).

Demanding an end to the manhandling of government, *Lysistrata* advises on the best way to set straight the city's affairs, using an elaborate domestic metaphor. Like wool, the city should first be cleansed of the sheep-dip of corruption, its leeches cudged, the snarls combed out, and the citizens carded together "in a single basket of common weal and general welfare" (p. 61). Out of this is spun a bobbin of yarn which is woven "without bias or seam, a cloak to clothe the city of Athens" (p. 61). *Lysistrata's* reducing the operation of government to a household chore deflates the men's immense sense of self-importance; it also makes the crucial point that the best government is an extension of homely virtues and skills, not a denial.

Yet having raised the wool to the high level of state policy, Aristophanes makes certain to bring it down again to a more personal level. And so the symbolic value of the wool is changed from public to pubic. Their political headway suddenly becomes quite unimportant to the women. Mad for men, they try to tunnel under or hoist themselves over the walls. When they are caught, they insist that they are deeply concerned for their wool left at home. *Lysistrata* understands the suffering involved when one's wool is unspread or one's flax is unpeeled, but she demands the women remain for the duration. Perceiving that the old wool alibi hasn't been particularly successful, another woman pleads that she must get home because she's having a baby. Somewhat skeptical, *Lysistrata* taps the woman's bulging belly and hears a metallic ring. Undaunted, the woman explains that it is a boy baby; but when her dress is lifted, a bronze helmet is discovered. The interest in wool and babies is a transparent masking of obvious sexual needs; but unless the men begin to recognize the primacy of this need and stop the war, there will remain the terrible frustration, the ruined wool of homelife, the lack of real babies. Boys must stop being bronze-helmeted soldiers and begin to be boys again.

And indeed the men do begin to discover—painfully and obviously—their maleness. Kinesias, bearing an immense erection, calls out desperately to his wife: “I can’t hold out much more. / I’d rather be dismembered. / *How long, ye gods, how long?*” (p. 79). Interestingly enough, he uses the same appeals as the women did when they were trying to escape to their men; he brings his son to inspire his wife’s maternal instincts; he mentions the wool at home being ruined through disuse; he now sees, as she has seen, how empty life is when a loved one is absent:

—Life is a husk. She left our home and happiness went with her. Now pain is the tenant. Oh, to enter that wifeless house, to sense that awful emptiness, to eat that tasteless, joyless food—it makes it hard, I tell you.

Harder all the time. (p. 81)

His wife, Myrrhine, resists his urgings and her urges, tantalizes and teases him, but does not give in. She knows that joy can only be restored to the home when they are all at home all of the time.

But that time is not far off, for a veritable phalanx of men in erectus converge to lament their plight:

—I’ve been up for hours. I was up before I was up. (p. 68)

—And what are you—a man? a signpost? a joint stock company? (p. 91)

—Hit ain’t the heat, hit’s the tumidity. (p. 98)

—The words are different, but the malady seems the same. (p. 99)

Clearly the men are ready to submit; and to satisfy their desires and end their frustrations, they will settle for “peace from any person, at any price” (p. 98). The willingness to stop the Peloponnesian War on such grounds trivializes the men’s reasons for starting and continuing the war, but once more there is the strong suggestion that trivial human pleasures are better than bad politics, and that good politics are founded on trivial human pleasures, and that human pleasures are never really trivial.

Therefore when peace comes, it is no mere abstraction, but a strikingly beautiful, stark naked woman who is the literal

embodiment of Greece: she serves as a map of the region during the subsequent peace talks. Following a general agreement about the deposition of the land, the Athenian representative has "an urgent desire to plow a few furrows," and the Spartan also feels the need "to work a few loads of fertilizer in" (p. 105). These remarks show that in turning their swords into plowshares, the men will not abandon their sexuality, but simply change its direction. It has become, at least metaphorically, a force associated with the stable and life-giving pursuits of making a home and renewing the earth.

Similarly, the participants agree that the most effective unifying force during the peace talks was the wine consumed. The commissioner has discovered that sobriety and "cold-water diplomacy" caused much mistrust and suspicion, while wine leads to "total pleasure, the free-and-easy / give-and-take of friendship" (pp. 109-10).

If the drama has demonstrated the strength and validity of the women's credo of personal and domestic fulfillment, it has also helped to redefine the traditional concept of masculinity. The phallic weapons—spears, torches, and battering rams—have proved to be at best impossible encumbrances, at worst terrible destructive agents. But if this was the case with phallic symbols, the phallus itself fared no better. Characters with erections did not appear strong or potent or heroic, but frustrated and downright silly. Phallic strength and dignity are contingent upon consummation; and so in terms of this drama, a man's integrity is achieved when he is at home making love to his woman.

While it is apparent that the couples formed are greater than the sum of their parts, it is equally apparent that the only fully realized individual in the drama is Lysistrata. She is principled, knowledgeable, political. She is articulate and forceful enough to make the women restrain their passions; farsighted enough to realize that the men will not be able to restrain theirs. That she lacks the coarse lust of her colleagues is not a sign of her sterility, but an indication of her self-control and self-contained confidence. Aristophanes leaves her uncoupled in the drama to emphasize this wholeness; and given her single condition, it is

