

Lysistrata: Modern Day Feminist, Ancient Joke

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Keywords: Lysistrata, Aristophanes, feminism, gender studies, Ancient Greece

Abstract

Most of the literature written on the topic of Ancient Greece was written by men, leaving out the female perspective and narrative. This is crucial to understanding the context of plays, art, and books of the time period. In an effort to have a more well-rounded view of Ancient Greece, the female perspective is needed. Without it, scholarly articles and reviews remain one-sided, and therefore skewed. In looking at works through the lens of women, Ancient Greece comes alive as a whole new civilization. Hopefully, more women will revisit this topic and revitalize the conversation of the art of Ancient Greece.

Introduction

Historical context should be considered when discussing or using books, art, and plays written in ancient times. To comprehend the meaning of those ancient works, it is important to understand the time period in which they were created. In modern societies, though, historical context is too often overlooked. Instead, ancient works are judged based on contemporary beliefs and attitudes, changing the original intention of the creator. Modern artists are often able to take a work and skew it into a creation that fits their interpretation for their audiences, disregarding the intention of the originator. *Lysistrata* has recently been claimed as an icon, both for those in search of an ancient feminist and those who admire her anti-war efforts. While modern theatre artists have claimed *Lysistrata* as a feminist icon, citing her strength and resilience, Aristophanes used the format of Old Comedy to create a play filled with humor at the expense of women, built upon the weak and dependent status of women in ancient Athens. By examining the status of women in classical Athens and the stark contrast between Athenian women and the character *Lysistrata*, as well as understanding the format of Old Comedy and how Aristophanes used women as comic devices, it can be understood that Aristophanes's original intent contrasts with how modern audiences and individuals perceive *Lysistrata*.

When Aristophanes wrote *Lysistrata* in 411 BCE, the reality of a woman's life was much different than what it is in modern times. A woman's entire life was determined from birth. As a child, girls would spend time with their mother in the women's quarters of the house. There girls learned important skills like spinning thread and weaving (Reeder 20). Their childhood would end the moment they turned fourteen, which was the common age for a young girl to be married off. She would marry an older man, typically twice her age, of her father's choosing; she would

have no say in the matter (Jones 94). A woman's life was essentially changing hands from one man to the next. From marriage onward, she would live her life in her husband's home. Once women gave birth, they were considered trustworthy enough to take on more responsibility and manage the household affairs (Pomeroy 36). It is unclear where a woman learned to manage the household, but it dominated her life once the responsibility fell to her. Assigning women the job of household affairs ensured that their lives would be spent at her home, inside. It was thought that women were unable to handle the strenuous outdoor life of a man, so they were only suited for housework. Women were not given freedoms in their lives; men decided what they were and were not allowed to do.

Athenian women were also not considered citizens in the eyes of society. Women were bound to their husband in every way because men held the prestigious status of citizen. It was a way of reinforcing women's dependence on men, since they could do nothing without a man who held citizenship. Women could, however, pass citizenship onto their male children (Jones 95). Women were expected to bring about the next generation of Athenian men and were necessary in Greek society for that reason alone. Although women were tasked with repopulating Athens with men, women would not even be considered Athenian because they had no claim to citizenship; they could only be described as the wife of an Athenian, the wife of a citizen (Reeder 23). The legal rights that came with citizenship were not applied to women either, only men. Even after death, women were still defined by their 'non-citizen' status, for their names would not appear on their own gravestones, only the name of their husband or father (Jones 95). Women's lack of citizenship was intentional; it was an ingenious way for men to remain the

dominant gender. Men continued to hold the power and built a society in which they thrived, and women suffered in the background.

Men controlled the lives of women by degrading their status until they were seemingly worthless, except for their wombs. To ensure that men stayed in the power position, they deemed women as insatiable beings, “unable to control any physical cravings at all, be it for food, alcohol, or sex” (Reeder 25). Intelligent and influential men believed this and spread that rhetoric around Athens, until it became common knowledge. Aristotle, too, fed into this thought, claiming that women possess some rationality, but they had no control over it; men were needed to assert authority over their irrational side (Pomeroy 34). It is even mentioned in Xenophon’s book, *Oeconomicus*. Xenophon was a Greek historian and member of the upper class who wrote *Oeconomicus* during his exile from Athens (Pomeroy 5). He maintained that a wife needed to be trained to control her appetites (Xenophon 141). Conversely, men were thought to be measured, perfect beings, so they were able to discipline themselves and not fall victim to the same urges that plagued women. To combat their insatiable side, Ischomachus, a friend of Socrates and a wealthy estate-manager, said that women needed to be, “sufficiently tamed and domesticated,” before they could become suitable wives (Xenophon 141). The language makes it clear that men were comparing women to animals that act on desire alone, not thought. Men assigned such characteristics to women in order to further separate the two genders, ensuring men remained dominant.

Medically, men did not comprehend the complicated nature of the female anatomy. Hippocrates, a Greek physician, often referred to as the “Father of Medicine,” claimed that there was medical reason for why women were subordinate to men: she had no control over the organs

in her body, especially the uterus, an organ that insisted upon pregnancy (Hippocrates 60). Medical thought reinforced the idea that women were only useful to fulfill the biological destiny of birthing the next generation. Hippocrates believed that virgins' suicidal thoughts, slanted veins, and violent inflammations were caused by the lack of pregnancy (Hippocrates 61). He promised that once a woman got pregnant, her symptoms would cease and she would be cured. Essentially, he believed that women's bodies fought them if they were not pregnant, so to keep women healthy, they had to be pregnant. Hippocrates also reinforced the idea of the woman as a house dwelling being. Hard work, or physical labor, he claimed, made a woman's womb heated and therefore it would turn inside her body, causing pain (Hippocrates 61). Not only did he claim that her womb turned inside her, but Hippocrates also claimed that it would roam her body freely in search of a source of moisture, often times hitting the liver as a result, which could cause "Herakles disease" or epilepsy (Hippocrates 62). Women needed to stay away from hard work and be pregnant if they were to stay healthy, a stark contrast from what men did. Their bodies were not equipped to handle the strenuous activities of men, which made them seem weaker. It was used as another reason as to why women needed to be controlled and were the inferior sex.

The status of women in ancient Athens is clearly shown through the secondary characters and the women's chorus in *Lysistrata*. Lysistrata, however, stands in stark contrast. She is the most 'masculine' woman out of the female characters in the play. Aristophanes did this specifically so that the female characters would still have a male-like authority figure to guide them through the play. Lysistrata lacks the one thing that defined ancient Athenian women: a husband and child. Though it can be assumed that she did have a family, she never mentions them, even when all the other women do. When convincing the other women to join her cause

she says, “Don’t you all miss your kiddies’ dads when they’re at the front? I expect that every one of you has a man away from home.” (Aristophanes 423). She leaves out her own husband and children in that scenario. The lack of children or a husband makes Lysistrata more important than the rest of the women, whose whole world was defined by the men and children in their lives. She had no duties to the family or to the house, just like a man. Lysistrata did not have a man to control her, she was independent. Without a husband, Lysistrata became her own person, and a strong person at that, who did what she wanted, not what the men in her life told her to do. For that reason, she had more power than the rest of the women in the play.

Lysistrata was also, unlike the other women, able to resist the ‘traditional female vices’ of sex and alcohol. Their plan to go on a sex strike began with a sacrifice of wine to the gods. They hoped this would secure their victory. While all the women are focused on the wine they sacrifice, Lysistrata resists this vice and refocuses the attention of the women, “Girls, I beg, be first to take the oath. [...] Hold your hands over the bowl – Lampito, are you listening? Now one of you repeat after me.” (Aristophanes 428). The wine does not even seem to faze her; it is clear she is not controlled by her vices, as women in ancient Greece were thought to be. Lysistrata is the strongest character, or a ‘masculine woman,’ because she forces the women to keep their oath. She controlled them in her own way just as men controlled their wives. When they are in the Acropolis, many women try and escape to their husbands, but Lysistrata catches them and persuades them to fight against the sexual weaknesses that have such a hold on them, “You wacky women, you miss your men, of course you do, and they miss you. Think of the lonely and lustless nights they’re spending. Be good girls, have patience and bear with this a little longer.” (Aristophanes 454). Aristotle said that women had a rational element but could not control it,

which is why they needed a man to rule them. Lysistrata took the place of that man for the rest of the women in the play, enforcing the control that they could not.

Though Lysistrata is seen as a more masculine heroine, she could also be viewed as a powerful woman, which is also unlike traditional women in ancient Athens. Single-handedly, Lysistrata was able to rally women from all of Attica, including Sparta, with whom Athens was at war with during the play's production. She assembles the women with the promise of the war's end, "Well, suppose I hit on a way to stop the war. Would you be with me?" (Aristophanes 424). The women are hesitant at first, but Lysistrata is so powerful and influential that she changes their minds and they agree to join her cause. Lysistrata was also the only named character that stands up to the chorus of men when they antagonize the women at the Acropolis, saying that, "it's your turn to listen to good advice and to keep your mouths shut as we had to, and if you do we'll get you out of the mire" (Aristophanes 443). She even outright tells the Magistrate that she hopes he would die, "Why don't you shut up and die? There's a nice graveyard nearby and you'll need a coffin it seems. I'll bake you some funeral rolls" (Aristophanes 447). While it takes a chorus of women to speak out against the chorus of men, Lysistrata is powerful enough to take on the men all at once without backing down. She showed strength that typical Athenian women did not have, and that is why the women of Greece trusted her plan.

The format of most of Aristophanes's plays, *Lysistrata* included, was called Old Comedy, and the only old comic works to survive were Aristophanes. The entire basis of knowledge on Old Comedy is solely derived from Aristophanes. It was an ancient writing form that began around 445 BCE and ended around 385 BCE (Ehrenberg 16). Old Comedy was a popular form

of comedy that had no restrictions on what the play could be about. According to Matthew Wright, author of *The Comedian as Critic: Greek Old Comedy and Poetics*, writers, “entertained their audiences with a wide range of material including knockabout physical humor, inventive wordplay and puns, parody, mythological burlesque, utopian fantasy, theriomorphic choruses, bizarre costumes, elaborate song-and-dance routines, social commentary and political satire” (1). It was meant to be the ultimate form of entertainment for ancient Greek audiences. That was Old Comedy’s sole purpose. It was not meant to be taken seriously or to have lessons or advice for the audience. In fact, as Wright further observes, it is; “difficult to find evidence that anyone at Athens ever took any notice of comedy (or, for that matter, tragedy) when making political decisions” (20). There was a formula for writing these great Old Comedy plays, as well. Plots would typically parallel real-life situations and events but contain circumstances that could never happen in real life (Brockett 16), such as women taking over the Acropolis in *Lysistrata*. Since this would never have been possible due to the status of women, it was used for comedic effect. There was also an emphasis on eating, drinking, money, and sex (Brockett 16). Those were guaranteed to arouse laughter from the audience.

The appearance of women in Old Comedy provides insight into how the general male population felt about them. In Aristophanes’s early plays, female roles were a rarity. If he did use one, she was either mute or spoke her lines through a man. This was the case in his play *Peace*. *Peace* is a woman, but she does not speak for herself at all in his play. When she finally speaks, it is through a male character, Hermes (Heath 14). Without a man she is completely helpless. This gives a good indication of Aristophanes’s view on women. His views seem to align with gender roles of the time. The silent and dependent female character of his earlier plays “speak” to this. It

was his later plays that finally included women with voices, but it was only to make fun of them. Those were the two types of young women found in Athenian comedy: those that were inserted to be a joke and those that were silent, dependent on men like the traditional Athenian women they protected (Hughes 202). There were also two roles based on age: old and young women. The older women could no longer have children and thus resembled men due to their barren nature and, as such, were freer (Hughes 202). This differs from the younger women who were often made fun of for not being able to resist their vices and for having insatiable appetites (Hughes 202). Women were often stereotyped this way in Old Comedy because all the old comic playwrights were men writing for men.

These comedic devices based on gender perceptions are prevalent in *Lysistrata*. *Lysistrata* is a play that follows women as the main characters. This may suggest that Aristophanes was an ally for women, but sadly it was only for comedic effect. Women's supposed vices, their insatiable appetites, are highlighted in his play. The first vice he discusses is women's constant desire for sex. This is seen at the very beginning of the play, after Lysistrata tells the women that they must give up sex with their husbands to end the war.

ALL. Oh no!

LYSISTRATA. Hey, don't turn away...Where are you off to so dolefully with
clamped lips, ashen cheeks, and shaking heads?

Will you or won't you do it? What's bugging you?

CALONICE. This is where I stick...Let the war drag on.

MYRRHINE. Me too. I couldn't for the life of me. Let the war drag on. (Aristophanes 425)

It was funny that women could not even put their sexual desire aside for the betterment of the country. It was funny that they were so weak. The women display a similar problem toward the end of the play after they have taken the Acropolis: they have been without sex for far too long and try to escape. One claimed that she needed to get home because the moths were eating at her wool; another woman claims that she forgot to shuck the flax at her house, and another even claims to be pregnant by placing a helmet underneath her dress in an attempt to escape (Aristophanes 453). All the women would have abandoned the cause just because they could not control their libido. It was an effective comic device for the men of ancient Athens.

The second vice Aristophanes touched on in *Lysistrata* was alcohol. Women were not only unable to control themselves around men, but around liquor as well. After the women agree to stand with Lysistrata and abstain from sex with their husbands, they must sacrifice and take an oath. They were going to make a sacrifice over a shield, but found it improper, since they were trying to end the war. Instead, Lysistrata suggests that, “we put an enormous black wine bowl in position and over it we slaughter a skin of Thracian wine, swearing not to ... add a drop of water” (Aristophanes 427-428). The women rejoice at the idea but are focused more on the wine than the actual oath. Calonice says, while watching Lysistrata pour it, “What a robust and richly colored spurt!” Lampito declares, “The aroma’s superb without a doubt” (Aristophanes 428). At the expense of the women, Aristophanes employs this device to make fun about how susceptible women are to wine.

Aristophanes also employed the use of impossibilities for comedic effect. First and foremost, women were taught to be invisible when leaving the house (Reeder 21), therefore women would have never been able to assemble as they did in *Lysistrata*. They would have

drawn too much attention and would have been dispersed. More than that, the entire sex strike would have never worked. Women were expected to be monogamous beings, but their husbands were not subjected to the same conscriptions. It was said by an Athenian orator, “Mistresses we have for pleasure, concubines for daily attention to our bodies, but wives to be the bearers of legitimate children” (Pomeroy 35). Men could have sex with multiple women, but especially female slaves. In reality, the sex strike would have done nothing because wives were not the husbands only source of sex. Women could also not deny their husbands sex. They were obliged to have sex with them whenever they desired, as men were the dominating power. Therefore, none of these events could have taken place. These impossibilities were used for comedic effect, not to make political statements.

The use of the character, Reconciliation, was also included for comic effect. Reconciliation appears only once during the play, when the men are negotiating peace. Lysistrata brings her on stage, completely naked, for the men to gawk at her beautiful body. The men simply cannot focus when looking at her, and Lysistrata takes full advantage of it by letting the men divide Greece up using her body as a map.

FIRST ATHENIAN DELEGATE. Let’s think ... Yes, this pubis of Echinous here,
and these buttocks of Malia with their inlet,
and the two legs of Megara – I mean the walls.

SPARTAN DELEGATE. Gee, fella, is that all? Yer askin’ for most everythin’.

LYSISTRATA. Get on with you. You’re not going to scrap over a pair of legs are you?

FIRST ATHENIAN DELEGATE. I’m stripping, ready for plowing.

SPARTAN DELEGATE. Me, too, damn it. I’m fertilizin’. (Aristophanes 472)

Lysistrata uses the slave woman to her advantage to seduce the men into making peace.

Aristophanes uses her naked body for comedic effect; the men have been sex-starved for so long that they cannot control themselves. Significantly, it also highlights the use of mute women in previous works by Aristophanes. Reconciliation does not speak, much like Peace; she only communicates through Lysistrata, the substitute male figure.

Modern theatre artists have pulled inspiration from *Lysistrata* for their own, often, feminist/pro-women works. In the aftermath of the Second World War, writer Heiner Muller read through and ‘probed’ *Lysistrata* in hopes of creating an adaptation of the play that related to the current gender climate in East Germany (Weber 117). In his time, Muller was considered a feminist. To him, *Lysistrata* seemed to be a, “logical extension of his earlier efforts to present a proto-feminist discourse on stage” (Weber 121). He saw Aristophanes’s work as a feminist piece and drew inspiration from it. Although he never finished his play, the last version of it called *Lysistrate 70*, makes it clear that *Lysistrata* spoke to him not as a comedy that made fun of women, but as a piece about feminine perseverance. He sought to harness the essence of his interpretation of *Lysistrata* and put it on stage in the hope that it would make the lives for the women of East Germany better and they would find strength through it.

Even the creation of an organization has been inspired by feminist/anti-war interpretations of Aristophanes’s play. After the terrorist attack in America on 9/11 and the subsequent bombings led by the United States in Afghanistan, an activist group formed called The Lysistrata Project. It was meant to serve as a, “call for women to stand against war,” just as Lysistrata had during the Peloponnesian War (*The Lysistrata Project*). Although their initial goal was anti-war, they soon developed into an organization that simply called for peace while

recognizing, “the rising of the long suppressed Sacred Feminine” (*The Lysistrata Project*). For this organization, *Lysistrata* represented this feminine power that still was repressed in society. They saw the character Lysistrata as a feminist symbol of power that women could rally behind to make change, just as she had done in the play. The Lysistrata Project got their message across by staging readings of the play across the United States, eventually branching out to countries all over the world (*The Lysistrata Project*). Staged readings were also meant to inspire women. They give a “kudos” to the author as well, citing these words of Lysistrata: “We need only sit indoors with painted cheeks, and meet our mates lightly clad in transparent gowns of Amorgos silk, and perfectly depilated; they will get their tools up and be wild to lie with us. That will be the time to refuse, and they will hasten to make peace, I am convinced of that!” (*The Lysistrata Project*). They claim this as the heart of their project, to show that feminine power could overcome obstacles, even if that means using uncommon means to achieve that goal. Lysistrata made peace in her time, and The Lysistrata Project calls upon her strength in all women to make peace, too.

Discussion

Although some individuals and organizations use *Lysistrata* as inspiration for their own admirable feminist agendas, Aristophanes did not write the play for that purpose. *Lysistrata* could never have been considered feminist due to the nature of Old Comedy, which made fun of the status of ancient Athenian women. Those who hail Lysistrata as a feminist icon simply have no context in which to understand that she was never intended to be anything more than a joke. This comic female protagonist possessed no qualities of ancient Athenian women. Lysistrata was a female turned masculine to keep the other women, controlled by their insatiable vices, in order.

While some of her passages may seem uniquely feminist, that does not constitute her as a feminist figure. In fact, the play is rampantly anti-feminist when its context is understood. Although some modern artists and audiences may see this play as a beacon of feminism, it is clear that *Lysistrata* was simply created to make fun of women and to make men laugh, nothing more.

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