

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Lysistrata*** 411 B.C.E.

Aristophanes

### **Story.**

Aristophanes is from the start, in *The Acharnians*, a thinking critic, who makes use of all the devices of the Old Comedy and its stage, to establish his broad sweeping critique of social woes. He attacks war and its ravages, with particular consistency. The world of Dicaeopolis is exhausted by war. Trade has been interrupted, farming practices have been abandoned, and neighbors have been sundered from one another. Corrupt military commanders have come out on top—at least as long as the war drifts in favor of Athens. (This only lasts so long, and virtually ends with the Sicilian Expedition.)

*War.* The war theme continues to haunt Aristophanes as he develops. In *The Knights* he devotes his critical fury to the military commander, Cleon, whose pomposity and greed have come under Satiric fire in *The Acharnians*. War is a disaster, in this early play, because of the barrier it sets up against pleasures, delights of life—for Aristophanes life is always inherently good, even good because it is fun; because life is not, for Aristophanes, the dark life anger we will one day hear from such diverse modern thinkers as Jonathan Edwards, Schopenhauer, or Nietzsche. While *The Clouds* and *The Wasps* video life under loss of social meaning—intellectual games and legal strategies skewered as soon as they become empty activities cut off from social meaning-- *Peace* brings the focus of attack sharply back onto War itself, with Trygaeus undertaking a one person expedition to the Father God, Zeus, to display the intensity of his dread of continuing war. In *The Birds*, Aristophanes sends two war weary Athenian emissaries to found a new, by and large viable, community in the sky, where bird culture and human culture can enjoy one another, and some kind of original felicity can return to earth.

*Women.* To this point, in Aristophanes' critique of war, men have been the conspicuous critics and rebels, pressing for social renewal, and ridiculing their own greed and lack of discipline. With *Lysistrata*—and the play that follows it—the burden of critique will shift to women, who for the most part, in the dramas preceding, have been social backstory. Can it be that at this point—*Lysistrata*, 411, as the Athenians swoon from the Sicilian Expedition losses—Aristophanes imagines a new vision of the Athenian situation, a vision of a new way to seize the seemingly endless war problem, to see it as the result of male neediness, of an overheated temperature in the infantry? (What Pisthetairus learned in *The Birds*, Cinesias (for instance) starts learning in *Lysistrata*. Cool it man!)

*Resolution.* The lesson of *Lysistrata* is that the women of Hellas have as much power as their husbands, to cut off the evil of war. The women's leader, Lysistrata, is a middle class housewife with dignity and brains; she devises a plan to use sexuality to take power over the men of both Athens and Sparta, and to bring about a breathing space, and possibly more than that, for the men. Lysistrata's plan is to withhold sex from the guys until they cry uncle. (No, the fine details of this coercion are not spelled out.) With support from the summoned women of Athens and Sparta, Lysistrata harangues her fellow wives over a huge bowl of oath-punch, gathers them on the Acropolis, and makes them confederates in a plan not to give their guys sex until the men stop fighting. Coordinate with this young married ladies' plan, Lysistrata organizes the Old Women of Athens to take over the Acropolis, barricade and possess it, and declare an effective war on the old men of the city—a collateral military action, to bring all Greek males to their knees. Ultimately the guys declare an end to fighting, as they see less and less of their ladies' pussies.

### **Themes**

*Withholding.* Lysistrata's master discovery, of the power of withholding sex, is artfully, if 'unrealistically,' made the central decision of the play, and the most delicious exemplification of it is the reunion between Cinesias (*gung ho* military at the start) and Myrrhine, his young wife. Spotting this

returning soldier, Lysistrata informs her friend Myrrhine, and urges her to torture her hubby, in line with the new procedural guidelines Lysistrata has laid down for her female troops. We are treated to the leitmotif scene, as Cinesias, bent double with an erection, and desperate to screw, is held at bay by his (in fact equally horny) wife, while she teases him until he is deflated—running off to get him a pillow or blanket while all he want is to ride her. SEX, the IT at the forefront of this play, is the precious commodity to withhold, and Aristophanes knows how to make its absence the only thing that is present.

*Collaboration.* Lysistrata not only withholds, but she brings together. Of course she brings the men together, by showing them how needy they are, but she also brings the women—all Greek women—together, both because they are needy too and because they understand what a profound effect they can have, with the aid of Lysistrata's scheme.

*Brains.* The primacy of trickery and ingenuity is written all over the present play, in which one woman's plan can sway the course of a war. Of course, Aristophanes is saying, this is a flight of fancy play, but its point is not fanciful at all; the obstacles to peace and happiness, in the earlier work of Aristophanes, are stodgy greediness, hunger for power, and lack of imagination. Changes of mindset could resolves many of the issues facing the Athenian citizens.

## **Characters**

Chorus of Old Men  
Chorus of Old Women  
Lysistrata. Young Athenian wife  
Calonice. Young Athenian wife  
Myrrhine. Young Athenian wife  
Lampito. Young Spartan wife  
Magistrate  
Cinesias. Husband of Myrrhine  
Baby  
Spartan Herald  
Spartan Ambassador  
Athenian Ambassador  
Athenian Delegates  
Doorkeeper  
Two diners  
Stratyllis  
Five young women

## **CHARACTER ANALYSIS**

**Lysistrata** Lysistrata is the motive force behind the present play, the brains behind its plot of withholding sex, and at the same time the one person who realizes how vulnerable the women of the play are. As a married woman, but on another level from her sex hungry sisters, Lysistrata is a planner, a negotiator, a disciplinarian, yet at the same time viscerally aware of the power of sexuality in holding her society together. She is both part of the sexual world and sufficiently outside the limitations of desire, so that she is able to manipulate desire in a large cause.

*Remonstrative.* Lysistrata bawls out Calonice, for being so typically woman, and so dependent on her man's taking care of her sexual needs.

*Provocative.* Lysistrata asks her girlfriends if they would be willing to follow her, if she proposes a strike on sex, until the guys give up fighting.

*Oath taker.* Lysistrata proposes, to all the Greek ladies who have answered her summons, that they prepare for sex abstention. A huge vat of wine becomes the sacrificial oath-vessel.

*Vengeful.* Lysistrata informs her male opponents that she is sick of their one sided machismo, and intends to make them pay in bed, until they stop the fighting.

**Parallels.** One thinks of John Fletcher's *The Tamer Tamed*, 1611, in which Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* comes in for sharp reinterpretation. (In Shakespeare Petruchio tortured Kate. Now the lady does the torturing.) This time, in *Lysistrata*, it is the female sex that withholds its favors, tortures the guys, waiting for male compliance. Jumping ahead to our own time we look at work like Spike Lee's *Chi-raq* (2015) musical crime thriller with its anti-gun rap-dialogue, and a bevy of educated ladies no longer interested in playing macho games. The women are in charge and on top, and have had it up the wazoo. Withdrawal of sex, in the interests of peace, has been the trigger to any number of musical show riffs in our time, when every current issue of sexual and political morality can be brought front and center.

### **Discussion questions**

What kind of critique, of the women themselves, does *Lysistrata* raise? What is the weakness of the women.?

Does *Lysistrata* propose an all-female polity?

Do the women win in the end? Is this a feminist drama, devoted to showing that 'women can get along on their own?' Or does Aristophanes leave us, with a sigh, resigned to status quo, in which men are the power holders?

Does Aristophanes come down on the side of the women, in the end? Did he, in any of his earlier plays, ascribe political or military power to women? Or did the 'blame,' in earlier plays, always come down on 'guys who fucked up.'