

Two Observations on Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*

Nigel Wilson

I. The Aim of the Play

IT IS COMMONLY BELIEVED that *Lysistrata* is a comedy with a serious message, the most usual formulation being that the heroine is an entirely serious character. As examples of this approach to the play one may cite from Gilbert Murray's characterisation of Lysistrata the words "she is fully in earnest" and from a recent essay by Jeffrey Henderson the view "Lysistrata will always, except for the purposes of climax, emphasis or shrewd generalship, speak like the high-minded leader she is." In a previous work Henderson had said that Lysistrata is "undeniably heroic and *always* serious-minded" (my italics), while correctly noting that there are some jokes in her lines.¹ In this paper I should like to argue that both the words of the heroine and the context in which comedies were produced invite a different judgement. Although there are in my opinion a few passages which may have been intended to strike a serious note, their effect is swamped by a pervasive hilarity. Some other scholars have already noted that the military situation was still very difficult for Athens in the first half of the year 411, and that consequently there would have been little point in encouraging the public to hope for a satisfactory peace treaty with an enemy still very much in the ascendant.² While accepting this argument as reasonable in the light of the evidence available to us, I should like to strengthen the case by considering three facts which have not been given due weight in previous discussions. These facts all concern the effect that *Lysistrata* may be assumed to have created with the original audience. I believe that the Athenian public will have found her far too amusing to be taken seriously. Their reasons can be summed up as follows: *Lysistrata*'s part is played by a man, it is played before an audience consisting

¹ G. Murray, *Aristophanes, a Study* (Oxford 1933) 178; J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse* (New Haven/London 1975) 97; *YCS* 26 (1980) 170.

² Most recently this view has been put forward by H. D. Westlake, *Phoenix* 34 (1980) 38-54.

entirely of men, and a number of things said by Lysistrata are incompatible with the idea that she is a heroine who has to be taken seriously.

The first of these considerations requires little justification. I do not know of any evidence that female parts were played by women. For the present purpose we may leave aside the question whether the figure of Reconciliation at the end of the play was a woman or a male actor dressed up to resemble one.³ The second point is more controversial, but despite the almost universal agreement among modern scholars that women were free to attend the dramatic festivals, I am convinced that several passages of Aristophanes demonstrate the opposite. At *Ecclesiazusae* 1146 an invitation to dinner is issued to the whole audience in terms that do not mention women, and similarly at the beginning of *Peace* (50–53) a slave says he will explain the plot to various categories of spectator, again omitting all mention of women. Later in the same play (962–67) a slave is told to sprinkle some barley from the sacrifice over the audience. His master Trygaeus asks if he has done so and receives an assurance that everyone in the audience has some barley. Trygaeus objects that the women have none, which is sometimes taken as a proof that they were in the theatre but not allowed to take seats near the front. There is no other evidence to support the suggestion. The slave's reply, "Still, their husbands will give them some tonight," is rather lacking in point if that interpretation is correct. It would acquire a distinctly Aristophanic tinge if one accepted the possibility of *double entendre* in the word for barley.⁴ The women in that case are not to be imagined as present in the auditorium, but will get something when their husbands return from the theatre. The husbands' return is mentioned in another context which supports the view for which I am arguing: in *Thesmophoriazusae* 395ff it is said that on entering the house they look suspiciously at their wives and at once make sure that no lover is hidden away. Although the passage is part of a humorous speech it is hard to avoid this inference. The same is true of another passage a few lines later in the same play (450–51): a woman complains that Euripides has taught their husbands not to believe in the gods. The remark

³ J. Vaio, *GRBS* 14 (1973), 379 n.48 may be right that it was a male actor, but his argument about the coldness of the weather is adequately answered by K. McLeish, *The Theatre of Aristophanes* (London 1980) 153.

⁴ While it may not be quite certain that *κριθάω* has sexual meaning (*pace* LSJ), *κριθίαω* in Cleanthes *SVF* I fr. 583 does, and sexual overtones in the word *κριθή* in the fifth century are possible. There is a good case for seeing this meaning at Theognis 1249–52, 1267–70, and perhaps at *Birds* 565.

would be odd if women were in the audience.⁵ Finally some lines in the *Birds* (793–96), which are perhaps the strongest evidence. The chorus explain to the audience in the antepirrhema of the parabasis what a blessing it is to have wings. “If any one among you happens to be conducting an affair and were to see the lady’s husband sitting here in the councillors’ seats, he too could get some wings and fly away, and then having enjoyed his mistress’ company he could fly back from her house again.” That is nonsensical if the women were in the audience. These passages, when taken in conjunction with the argument from silence that Lysistrata and Praxagora in *Ecclesiazusae* lose a golden opportunity by making no appeal to the women allegedly occupying so many of the places in the theatre, seem to me to prove that at any rate in the fifth and early fourth centuries only men were present in the theatre.⁶ If we accept that Lysistrata was played by a man to an entirely male audience, and remember that the atmosphere in which the comedies were performed was something like that of a carnival, we shall find it hard to believe that the response of the audience was anything other than what it is now fashionable to call male chauvinism.

My third argument is that Lysistrata makes several jokes or other remarks which she ought not to if she were to be treated as entirely serious. Although her jokes have not been overlooked by all authorities,⁷ there is a general unwillingness to make the correct inference from them. It is as if Lysistrata were interpreted as a serious heroine who uses humour to achieve her aims, whereas I would see her as a mock-serious character who is made frequently to say something inconsistent with her alleged high principles.

At line 25 she makes what seems an amusing admission by saying, “Not in that sense; otherwise we should have gathered without delay.” Although it is possible to treat this remark as cynical, it looks far more like a tacit acceptance of a prejudiced masculine view. Lines 107–10 are not at all serious. Here, however, editors are perhaps at fault; the attribution of the lines is not certain and they could be given to one of the other women. That explanation is not available for 125–28, lines in paratragic style which are much overdone if they are meant to be taken as a straight-faced expression of dismay at the reaction of the women to line 124. Line 158 is a witticism which does not belong to the type of character which most interpreters suppose

⁵ See H. Box, *CR* n.s. 14 (1964) 241–42.

⁶ The best account is by A. Willems, *Aristophane III* (Brussels 1919) 425–33.

⁷ Henderson (*supra* n.1) 97 rightly criticises Schmid for denying humour to Lysistrata.

Lysistrata to be. In the swearing of the oath the additions made at 229 and 231 are humorous vulgarities; the oath was complete already without such references to *figurae Veneris*. In 708–09 there is paratragedy, and in 715 solemnity is cast aside. In 770 Lysistrata reads out an oracle in hexameters, a clever parody full of *double entendre*. At 862–63 it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Lysistrata responds to an obscene gesture by Kinesias. And the final speech of Lysistrata at 1114ff, though it has been described by one eminent modern authority as completely serious in character and without a single joke,⁸ contains a good deal of humour.

The first point is not one on which it would be safe to lay much emphasis; I refer to the word *ἀνθαδικῆ* in 1116, which appears to be a *hapax legomenon* and may possibly have been coined for the occasion as *ἀνθάδης* would not scan. Words formed in *-ικός* had a certain vogue at this time, and Aristophanes had exploited the humorous possibilities offered by this fact at *Knights* 1378ff. Thirteen years after it may still have been possible to get a laugh out of the same linguistic affectation.⁹

In 1119 the word *σάθη* is probably a vulgar expression. To the best of my knowledge it is otherwise attested only in three passages of Archilochus. Those who suggest that it was part of polite vocabulary are maintaining an intrinsically implausible proposition.¹⁰ If the Athenians thought of the word as Ionic rather than Attic, its use may have appeared affected rather than elevated. But as it seems to have been part of the vocabulary of an author already regarded as a master of invective (Pind. *Pyth.* 2.55), it is more likely to have been abusive in tone.

In the climax of the speech by Lysistrata the first and last lines (1124 and 1135) are parody or quotation from tragedy (there is no need to be sceptical of this information furnished by the scholiast), while 1125–27 are clearly paratragedy because of their metre and style. The high-minded appeal to panhellenic sentiment is sandwiched between lines that were intended to be amusing. I cannot believe that this amusing quality and the rude interjections of the Athenian and the Spartan later in the scene should count for nothing in its interpretation; yet that is the result of reading the text without attending to the literary and linguistic hints that it yields. There is no criticism of the Athenian and the Spartan for their response. Thoughts of panhel-

⁸ G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (London 1972) 368.

⁹ C. W. Peppler, *AJP* 31 (1910) 428–44, refers to the word without making it clear exactly how far he would press the interpretation of the suffix *-ικός*.

¹⁰ Henderson (*supra* n.1) 109–10, following Wilamowitz.

lenism are submerged by the general hilarity of the play as it moves towards its finale.

One further question. When Lysistrata refers to Cimon's expedition to help the Spartans at Mount Ithome (1137ff) and then speaks of the rule of the Peisistratid family as a period of great hardship for the Athenians (1150ff), she is distorting history. Should one not at least consider the possibility that the distortion was evident to the public and at the same time amusing to them because of the speaker's ignorance of well known facts? If that were so, we should then be forced to abandon the otherwise highly attractive idea that the favourable mention of Cimon, the only one in Aristophanes, is a hint of where the poet's political sympathies lay.¹¹

If the arguments that I have advanced are valid, it is time for the presentation of Lysistrata as the high-minded ancestor of modern pacifist and feminist movements to disappear from histories of Greek literature. It is not my intention to deny that the concept of *σπουδογελοιοι* can be usefully applied to Greek comedy; but in this play the comic element is more than sufficient to undermine any alleged serious element in remarks relating to foreign policy.¹²

II. The Reference to Lines 115–16 in Plato's *Symposium*

Modern editors of Aristophanes do not seem to have noticed, or perhaps have not thought it worth recording, that the amusing exaggeration uttered by one of Lysistrata's companions at lines 115–16 has an important analogy in Plato's *Symposium* (191D). The editors I refer to are Willems (1919), Wilamowitz (1927), and van Daele in Coulon's Budé text (1928). One has to go back to the much less admired editions of Blaydes (1880) and van Leeuwen (1903) to find a mention of the parallel. This doxographic investigation provokes gloomy thoughts about the concept of progress in scholarship, but it is not my object in this note to cast aspersions. Wilamowitz at least may have been consciously following the principle explicitly formulated in and made famous by his own commentary on Euripides' *Heracles*:¹³ the duty of the commentator is to elucidate the effect of the dramatic text on the

¹¹ de Ste. Croix (*supra* n.8) 361.

¹² I should like to thank John Vaio for his helpful observations on an earlier version of this note.

¹³ *Euripides Heracles*⁴ I 257f, III 1.

original audience in the Athenian theatre. A less strict view would allow one to add notes on passages that had their greatest effect after the first performance. The passage we are dealing with falls into that category.

Lysistrata asks her companions if they would help her bring the war to an end, supposing that she found some method. The first replies with enthusiasm and an admission that she is an alcoholic: "by the two gods, I certainly should, even if I had to pawn this dress and drink the proceeds the same day" (112–14). Aristophanes then makes the other Athenian woman offer her support in a still more absurd way by saying, "I too would help, even if I had to slice my body in two and give away one half, so that I looked like a flat fish" (115–16). (The precise wording is uncertain, and Coulon prints a text that seems to me impossible on account of the metre and syntax in 116; but the general sense, including the reference to the fish, is not in doubt.) In the *Symposium* Aristophanes is made to say, "each of us is therefore a token fragment of a human being, because he has been cut, like a flat fish, one made into two." The striking image, using the same word ψῆττα ('sole' or 'flounder')¹⁴ cannot be coincidental.

While editors of the *Symposium* have a better record of noticing the analogy, it is a blemish in Sir Kenneth Dover's recent edition that he does not mention it, and other editors do not appear to comment on its implications. Nevertheless it may serve as an additional argument in the interpretation of what Dover rightly calls "the only speech in *Smp.* which strikes a modern reader as founded on observable realities."¹⁵ That Plato would have wished it to be taken in a quite different way is suggested not only by Diotima's later rejection of its central theme (205DE), but by Aristophanes' remark that men who allowed themselves when young to be the targets of homosexual advances become outstanding figures in political life (192A). That is a frequent jibe in Aristophanes' plays: one may cite *Knights* 875–80, *Clouds* 1093, and *Ecclesiazusae* 112–14, and the same point is found in Plato Comicus fr. 186. Aristophanes' usual cynicism is covered here by a layer of irony.¹⁶ If we are right to look beneath the surface of his words and see what they would have meant if spoken in one of his plays, it is reasonable to suggest that the same method of interpretation should be applied to the other passage in his speech which has obvious contact with his extant works. In the context of the

¹⁴ D'Arcy W. Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Fishes* (London 1947) 294–95.

¹⁵ Kenneth Dover, *Plato Symposium* (Cambridge 1980) 113.

¹⁶ Dover 118; cf. W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy IV* (Cambridge 1975) 383–84, who calls the speech "a wild extravaganza."

Lysistrata the remark about flat fish is a grotesque absurdity. Plato knew that and presumably intended the allusion to be seen as such. It is an amusing accident that modern readers should find the development of this absurdity the most appealing part of the whole dialogue. Aristophanes would have been delighted by the thought that Plato's attempt to make him look ridiculous backfired.

LINCOLN COLLEGE, OXFORD
January, 1982