Aristophanes' Lysistrata

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WARNING: THIS LECTURE CONTAINS "ANATOMICALLY ACCURATE" VOCABULARY (AS DOES ARISTOPHANES). READ NO FURTHER IF YOU'RE OFFENDED BY SUCH. I'M SORRY, BUT THERE'S NO OTHER WAY TO TEACH HIM. IN A WORD, THE GREEKS WERE NOT PURITANS, SO WE'LL HAVE TO DEAL WITH STUFF THAT MIGHT MAKE SOME PEOPLE WITH STRONG PURITAN-LIKE VALUES UNCOMFORTABLE ...

1. Introduction

Aristophanes is the only practitioner of Old Comedy whose plays survive. His plays are relentlessly sexual and political, marked by great inventiveness and burlesque. Our play today, *Lysistrata*, was produced in 411 BCE, just after the Sicilian disaster. After twenty years of the Peloponnesian War, Aristophanes will write this play, universally regarded as a comic masterpiece about war, peace, and the "war between the sexes." This universal acclaim does not mean, however, as we will see, that Greek sex and politics are expressions of an ahistorical "human condition," or what have you.

2. Those names! (Aristophanes' "vulgarity")

Several of the characters' names are significant. *Lysistrata* = dissolver of armies. *Lampito* is a stereotypical Spartan name. *Myrrinhe* = a vulgar name for the female genitalia, something like "Miss Kitty" or another feline-derived term. *Kinesias* = a vulgar name for sexual intercourse, something a little stronger than "Screwy".

The whole notion of "vulgarity" deserves investigation. The daintiness or Latinate obscurantism of the translations in Lind are fascinating hints to the process by which sexual explicitness (or in general explicitness regarding bodily functions) became associated with "the people." To gloss "Myrrinhe" as *pudenda muliebria* instead of a straightforward translation into an English vulgarity collapses into a phrase the story of the growth of the modern European pornography industry in the 18th C. All too briefly, as the bourgeois reading public expanded and translations of the classics found a market, when translators were faced with the sexually explicit material of Aristophanes, Ovid et al., they often: a) changed meanings; b) didn't translate the sexually explicit passages, leaving them in the original; or, c) translated them into another learned tongue! (See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* [U Chicago Press, 1981] on the "deliberate falsification of historical records concerning [gays]" [17ff].) Or, regarding native language classics, editors "bowdlerized" them, as in the case of Shakespeare--recall Hamlet putting his head in Ophelia's lap and asking her if she thought he was alluding to "country matters"--say the first word slowly, breaking between syllables [*Hamlet*, 3.2.116]. The effect of these practices is to reserve sexually explicit materials for those educated in the classics. These restrictive practices created a market for either explicit porn, or for "racy novels," whose effect on

feminine sensibilities was relentlessly decried. In effect, sexual explicitness in English is "vulgar"; in learned tongues it is part of "the classics"!

3. Greek aesthetics of sex.

The bluntness of the names marks the Greeks as, to put it in vast understatement, non-Puritanical. This is not to say that sex was not an ethical issue for them. But it probably wasn't a moral issue. And it certainly wasn't psychological. By making these distinctions I follow the general trend marked off by Foucault in his *History of Sexuality II* (although Foucault wasn't a classicist, his work on the Greeks, when put in the context of his other work, is very interesting and on the whole taken seriously by classicists, even when they disagree with him). Generally speaking, the idea is that for the Greeks sex was an "aesthetic" issue: the idea was to shape a beautiful life, and that sex, along with diet and exercise, was an important area for taste, restraint, and demonstration of self-control. Of course, to some extent these were egg-head ideas, more observed in word than in deed! But we can say that although the Greeks respected the power of Aphrodite to disorder one's life, sex was not a moral issue in the sense of a single code of behavior, consonant with the structure of the universe and divinely ordained. (If there's any sexual behavior divinely ordained in Greek myth, it's rape! Zeus especially delights in disguises, often elaborate ones, like swans or bulls.) The Greeks had a multiplicity of codes, adapted to age, social standing, and gender; the one devoted to adult male citizen behavior was flexible, according to one's health and wealth. Thus damage to one's body or purse or to the balance and beauty of one's life [sometimes expressed as one's "soul"] was an issue, not so much "sin"--although to be sure certain extreme acts could outrage the gods. Thus the Greeks had explicitly a "double standard" regarding sexual freedom of husband and wife; technically speaking, Christians do not. Thus our phrase "double standard" relates to practice, not to moral theory. Finally, to say that the Greeks weren't "psychological" about sex means simply that for them it wasn't the key to one's personality, as it is to us post-Freudians.

4. The Athenian sex industry.

The plot of the *Lysistrata* hinges on a sex-strike by Greek wives to protest the Peloponnesian War. While the idea of political action by women was either tragic (*Antigone*) or comic, as in our play, part of the joke of the *Lysistrata* is that the Athenian citizen husbands would care about a sex-strike by their wives. This is because the outlets for sex for Athenian male citizens were numerous. Besides slaves of both sexes, and concubines, there was a well-established, state-regulated sex industry (established by Solon, who retained one form of citizen slavery: a father could sell his daughter were she to lose her virginity.) Like any industry, work conditions varied for the workers. (We must remember that "sex worker" is an economic term, while "prostitute" is a moral term. I'm not "against morality"; I just don't want to confuse it with socio-economic analysis.) At the top of the scale were the *hetairai* or "companions," who specialized in offering a cultivated social occasion, complete with musical entertainment, poetic readings, and interesting, informed conversation. The most famous woman of 5th C Athens was a foreign "companion" named Aspasia, who lived for a while with Pericles. She also had a business as a madam, and is said to have ended up in a prosperous marriage. From these heights one could descend all the way to the street walkers, with various stops in between. It's clear that Athenian men could buy just about any kind of sex they wanted. The frustrated Kinesias alludes to easy commercial sex at *Lysistrata* 723.

5. Athenian male-male sex.

Athenian males also had a variety of opportunities for same-sex practices. This has been a very controversial issue throughout the years (which is not to say that homophobia is ahistorical either: see Boswell here as well). There's some evidence that earlier Greeks had practiced male-male sex in initiation rites, as do several societies today. By the 6th C, the classic picture of Greek male love had evolved, with an older lover, in his late 20s, and a younger beloved, in his mid-late teens. (The classic ideal is thus not "pederastic" in the modern sense.) Ideally, it was pedagogic, in the sense that the beloved could form advantageous social connections and could learn the skills of war and rhetoric from the lover. But since the beloved was destined to become a citizen,

several issues accompanied this relationship, all concerning the future independence of the citizen. One, although gifts were permitted, the beloved was not supposed to solicit them, as this puts one on the slippery slope of sex work. (Compare modern dating: what happens when dinner and a movie is simply converted into cash?) Two, the beloved was not supposed to enjoy his giving gratification to the lover, as pleasure was assumed to be only on the part of the active male. Those who received pleasure from pleasing others were women; this couldn't be good training for a future male citizen. Third, male bodily integrity was to be preserved. The ideal position then is "intercrural," or between the thighs with partners facing each other. In this way the beloved was not penetrated, as was a woman. Anal intercourse between adult citizen males, especially on the part of the "recipient," was thus frowned upon ("recipient" is of course a phallocentric term: why not "enveloper"?). Aristophanes jokes often about Cleisthenes, the politician (*Lys* 1091), or Agathon, the playwright, both of whom apparently preferred this form of sex.

Here we can see the difference between the idealized form of Greek male-male sex, which carefully preserves male phallic privilege, and the ideological claims made for some forms of contemporary gay practice. That two or more adult males of the same social class could enjoy a variety of sex acts, without accepting permanently either the "husband" or "wife" roles, is said by some to negate the use of sex as the basis of a social power inequality, such as that of, precisely, the Ozzie and Harriet-style husband and wife, or customer and "prostitute" (in this case the moral term does its power work of degradation), or lover and beloved (which is why adult male-male sex was denigrated by traditional Greeks). (In such ideological matters I take Foucault's line: sexual "liberation" and other contemporary claims about the political effects of sex practices often serve only to enmesh us further and further into a power system in which "sexuality"--which we can gloss as the political and psychological effects of sexual practices--is a major part. To put it bluntly, more and better sex will never liberate us politically--which is not to say that the sex-power system should not be rigorously analyzed for its political effects!)

6. Athenian phallicism.

The emphasis on penetration in Greek male-male sex brings us to the issue of the Athenian phallic culture. One of the most notorious incidents of the Peloponnesian War was the "mutilation of the Hermes" on the eve of the Sicilian expedition. Almost every Athenian home had a little statue of Hermes, god of travellers, perched near the door--and Hermes had a large erection. As did lots and lots of Greek men and satyrs as they were represented in art. Although the evidence was hidden in museum storage rooms for many years, various studies of the past 30 years have revealed a widespread pornographic vase and drinking cup industry, with a variety of sexual practices explicitly depicted. In this cultural climate, then, it's not difficult to see how Aristophanes includes phallic humor in the *Lysistrata*. Since only men were actors, but both men and women were presented on stage, Athenian comedic convention called for wearing a leather phallus, or at least an exaggerated codpiece, to mark male characters. These came in various sizes, so you can imagine the comedic effect of Kinesias dropping offstage for a minute during his duel with Myrrinhe only to reappear with an even bigger erection. Or of Lysistrata's directions to her co-conspirators to "grab the Athenian by whatever is handy" (1120). Or of the dildo jokes at *Lysistrata* 27-29 and 109 (as Lysistrata calls it, her "leather consolation").

7. Why no Athenian lesbianism?

Why does Aristophanes represent the sex-mad Athenian women in *Lysistrata* as longing for their men or for their dildoes, but never as thinking of turning to each other for release, as the men threaten to go look for Cleisthenes? Now it is true that we do see the rather self-contained and reserved Lysistrata evaluating, with a "male gaze," the well-built Lampito (80). Other than that, there's no real hint of female-female eroticism or sex. There could be several explanations here. One, Aristophanes expresses a typical masculine projection in assuming that the phallus is the only thing women desire, and so can't even conceive of Athenian lesbianism. Two, there was Athenian lesbianism, but it was too shameful for Athenian men to acknowledge ("what, you mean the phallus--er, even MY phallus--doesn't satisfy my woman?"). Three, there was Athenian lesbianism,

but it was beneath the threshold of awareness of Athenian males ("who cares what they do back in their own quarters!"). Four, there really was no Athenian lesbianism.

We do today have some evidence of Spartan lesbianism. It may be that it was absent to a real degree in Athens due to the internalization of the denigration of women, as opposed to the relative appreciation of the role of the woman in Spartan society in raising warriors, and to the absence in Athens of adolescent all-female education, including physical training, as in Sparta. Isolated from non-family, same-age females and physically untrained, the Athenian woman did not have the social support to experiment with female-female sex.

8. The sex drive of Athenian citizen wives

Another part of the comedy of the *Lysistrata* is the sexual frenzy of the wives. This is of course part of a long-standing Western tradition, along with the idea of women's love of alcohol. (The idea that it is MEN who "only have one thing on their minds" is quite recent.) Obviously, much could be said here, but let's just say that one of the traditional tactics of patriarchy to ensure the fidelity of the respectable wife is to make sex for them only a means to fulfilling their reproductive duty ("lie back, close your eyes and think of England," as the perhaps too-quoted Victorian proverb had it--or is it only our self-congratulatory post-Victorian proverb?) Too much desire, too much pleasure is a dangerous thing for a wife. It could mean either an exhausted husband, or an anxious husband who's worried about his performance, or worst of all, a "promiscuous" wife. Given the strong desire for legitimate children, stimulating the sexual desire of wives was not the most prudent path! (It was in fact the case that the penalty for seduction was worse than that for rape: the seducer corrupted the spirit of the wife over time, the rapist merely stole the body once. The fear of seduction thus probably expresses the fear of awakened female desire.) The husband might think that it was probably better to allow the wife's desire to atrophy (or at least to satisfy it minimally: there was an Athenian law that prescribed three conjugal visits a month for those men married to an heiress!), and get one's kicks with slaves, concubines, sex workers, beloveds, etc.. (That the wives were aware of this competition and tried to feminize and sexualize themselves in order to compete for the attention of their husbands can easily be seen in the oath of the women in the *Lysistrata*.) Thus we might see the figure of the sex-mad wife in several ways. One, it's part of the joke of the play, since most Athenian wives had given up their sex desire. Two, it's an exaggerated response to the sincere frustration of Athenian wives (we can't forget that after the Sicily disaster there indeed was a bona-fide shortage of men). Three, it's part of typical patriarchal culture to warn men of the ravenous sexual appetites of their wives, so that they would continue to be on the lookout.

9. Is Lysistrata a feminist hero?

Maybe. In one strong sense, Lysistrata, like Antigone, performs politically mainly in order to restore traditional patriarchal relations: bring the men home into the beds of their wives. However, she does more than that: she claims that women could run the state, using the practical wisdom of the household, traditionally denigrated in favor of men's political wisdom. Lysistrata deflates such masculinist pomposity in the famous passage comparing politics to weaving (565ff). By such a rehabilitation of traditional feminine wisdom she shows that the patriarchal distribution of skills denies to men, and hence to politics, useful skills.

10. Can *Lysistrata* the play be read for feminist purposes?

Yes. It treats feminity as performance (again, recall the oath of the women--not to mention the fact that male actors played all the roles and that the audience was well aware of this). It reveals all sorts of masculinist projections about women's desire. It proposes, even if in jest, unified female political action--and the fact that it is intended as a jest also reveals the depth of Athenian patriarchy. Not only were they proud of the fact that they were so powerful and secure they could tolerate sophists and philosophers, you could also see them proud of the fact they could joke about such a crazy thing as female political action.