

THE *LYSISTRATA* AS A POST-DECELEIAN PEACE PLAY

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Recent studies of the imagery in Aristophanes' peace plays have done much to delineate the rich series of metaphors involving peace and war,¹ but insufficient attention has been paid to fertility as the dominant motif in this complex, and to the consistency of related motifs in all the peace plays prior to the *Lysistrata*. In this paper I wish to maintain that Aristophanes had developed a poetic perspective for the presentation of peace and war, and that external circumstances, *specifically the Spartan investment of Deceleia in 413 B.C.*, inspired him to vary this perspective significantly in the *Lysistrata*, from an essentially agrarian to an exclusively human point of view. The result was an advance in the presentation of women on the comic stage, and a more realistic appraisal of the effects of peace and war not on crops, but on human lives.

The association of peace with fertility was traditional (cf. Hesiod, *Works and Days* 225–37), and most appropriate to the genre of comedy, which derived at least partly from agrarian rites. Yet Aristophanes seems to have been the only poet to exploit this connection to oppose the Peloponnesian War.² In the earlier peace plays his basic strategy was to portray peace as a state of natural abundance, particularly of food, wine and sex. The human response to such a state is repeatedly presented as a celebration, which took the forms of various festivals, whether public (e.g., the Dionysia, the Anthesteria, harvest-time), private (marriage), or a mixture of both. Thus conceived, peace unites the vitality of nature, of which man is a part, with the sacredness of ritual.

Even more interesting was the poet's portrayal of war within this thematic complex. The starkness of battle was represented only symbolically in the

¹ After the pioneering work of C. Whitman, *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Harvard 1964), we now have H.-J. Newiger's "War and Peace in the Comedy of Aristophanes," *YCS* 26 (1980) 219ff., C. Moulton's *Aristophanic Poetry*, Hypomnemata 68 (Göttingen 1981) and, on the *Lysistrata*, J. Henderson's "Lysistrata: the Play and its Themes," *YCS* 26 (1980) 153ff.

² Cf. Newiger (above, note 1), 236. The only evidence I can find to the contrary is the remark in Hyp. III of the *Peace* that "many other poets counseled in favor of peace," but no examples are cited.

presence of helmets, crests, shields, etc. . . . Physical devastation was inflicted rather on the earth and its fruits than on its inhabitants, whose own suffering was couched more in terms of lack, dire as that could be; death is unheard of.³ Such a treatment often has the effect of distancing the conflict from the specific points of contention between Athens and Sparta; instead, war is depicted as the enemy of nature (and so obviously evil), while peace not only restores harmony with nature, but seems even to inaugurate a sort of Golden Age.

In the *Acharnians*, the fertility theme is only one of a number of motifs Aristophanes uses to contrast peace and war. Political incompetence is the keynote of the prologue, and economic repercussions are explored at length in the exemplificatory scenes following the parabasis. Even so, the pattern of imagery I have just described is already fully developed in the play. Indeed, for all the differences in technique and circumstances of production,⁴ the treatment of this particular pattern does not differ significantly from the *Acharnians* to the *Peace*, except that in the later play it is more elaborate and predominates over all other motifs.

It is not necessary to review in detail all the examples of this thematic complex. I need only recall a few major points. In both plays the physical damage inflicted by open warfare is restricted to agriculture and produce: chopped-down fig trees, burnt vine-props, spilt wine, etc. . . . Even when Lamachos, the only human casualty, cries out, "I'm done for, hit by an enemy spear!" (*Ach.* 1192),⁵ we cannot take him seriously; we know that his wounds resulted from a particularly clumsy fall, and that the "spear" was actually a vine-prop. Secondly, the blessings of peace are associated above all with the pleasures of festival, especially fertility festival (Rural Dionysia and Anthesteria in the *Acharnians*, cf. *Opora* and *Theoria* in the *Peace*). In both plays human sexuality is treated as an extension of agricultural fertility, as it was in cult. In the *Acharnians* this is most obvious in Dicaeopolis' phallic procession, but the finale of the play, as the hero reels about with a girl on each arm, further emphasizes this connection. In the *Peace* Aristophanes uses an intricate series of *double-entendres* linking human and plant reproduction (cf. esp. 706–8, 1340ff.).⁶ Of course human sexuality is celebrated in a ritual of its

³ It is not clear that any sort of comic tabu prevented Aristophanes from mentioning human death (the poet's silence about the plague may be a quirk of the tradition, since the plays of 427 and 426 are lost), but whatever the reason, his method remained, as we shall see, consistent until the *Lysistrata*. The transference of human suffering onto the agricultural plane can perhaps also be seen in Trygaios' tender comment upon his ruined vines, in terms that would be equally appropriate for children (*Peace* 628–29).

⁴ For some of these, cf. K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley 1972) 136f.

⁵ All translations of the Greek are my own, based on Coulon's Budé text of the plays, and, for the fragments, *Poetae Comici Graeci*, edd. R. Kassel and C. Austin, vol. III 2 (New York 1984) (henceforth *PCG*).

⁶ Newiger (above, note 1) 225 has pointed out how natural the connection was for the

own: marriage. This is mentioned only once in the *Acharnians*, but the passage is thematically significant: the groomsman alone receives a portion of Dicaeopolis' peace, on behalf of the bride, who is to use it as an aphrodisiac (1056ff.). The theme is, once again, expanded in the *Peace*: a wedding is the focal celebration of the play's finale, and Peace herself is called Mistress of Marriages at 976.

The consistency of this imagery is all the more remarkable because it extends to the fragments of other peace plays as well, although these have received less attention. The very title of Aristophanes' *Farmers* is already suggestive; the play has been dated to the late 420's⁷ and contains a wish to stop the war and start working in the fields again; bread and wine are among the hoped-for joys, and the wish is addressed to "Peace steeped in wealth, and my little team of oxen" (fr. III *PCG*). In addition, the problematic "second" *Peace*, whatever its date or relationship to the extant play, likewise continues the agricultural associations of peace. Most explicit is fragment 305 *PCG*., spoken by Farming herself (*Georgia*):

(Fa.) For all mankind am I of dearest Peace
the trusted nurse, stewardess, helpmate
guardian, daughter, sister—all these are my lot.
(B.) Well, what's your name? (Fa): My name? Farming.

And there is also the remark of Eustathios (1573.21)⁸ that Aristophanes in the (second) *Peace* "testifies that the harvests are continuous." Even without a context, such a reference again seems to link the state of peace with an agricultural Golden Age. Thus four plays exhibit almost identical imagery in the portrayal of peace, and so it seems we are justified in speaking of a poetic perspective which suggested itself almost automatically when Aristophanes chose to present the theme of war and peace.⁹

Now it has been noticed that this rich pattern of agrarian imagery is largely absent from the *Lysistrata*.¹⁰ Yet the poet's "political" ideals remained essentially the same: peace with Sparta and internal unity at Athens. I maintain that the new direction of the *Lysistrata* was inspired, not by a purely aesthetic decision on Aristophanes' part, but by external events, specifically

Greeks, whose marriage formula was "for the plowing of legitimate children," but it should be added that it was Aristophanes who made the topical connection between this motif and the benefits of peace.

⁷ Cf. *PCG* p. 77.

⁸ Quoted by M. Platnauer, *Aristophanes' Peace* (Oxford 1964) xix.

⁹ Of course the poet was by no means locked into this formula. The *Holcades* (*Freighters*; 423?) was another peace play, according to Hyp. III of the *Peace*, yet it would seem to have had little connection with rural themes. Cf. Kaibel's remarks on the play, cited in *PCG* p. 226-27.

¹⁰ Th. M. de Wit-Tak, *Vrede, Vrouw en Obsceniteit bei Aristophanes*, (Groningen 1967) Engl. summ. 127.

the Spartan investment of Deceleia in 413 B.C., two years before the *Lysistrata* was presented. For, as Thucydides explicitly tells us (7.27–28), it was this move which effectively stopped all agricultural activity in Attica. Seasonal raids, so lamented by the farmers of *Acharnians* and *Peace*, had not prevented the use of the land during the extended periods of relative tranquility (this is corroborated by the Oxyr. Hist. XVII, 5); now, however, the evacuation of Attica was permanent, and all supplies had to be imported. From a nation of small farmers (Thuc. 2.14) the Athenians had become perforce full-time urban dwellers, their walls guarded day and night against attack.

Of course, that the Athenians were deprived of their land imposed no constraints whatever on Aristophanes the artist. He was free to continue working with anti-war agricultural themes, whether with a sense of nostalgia, or in some fantastic reversal of the status quo. He does not do this, however. The rallying cry “To the Fields” is heard no longer; in the *Lysistrata* the poet accepts the physical restrictions imposed on his city, and sets its scenes, alone among the extant peace plays, entirely within the city limits.

Yet Aristophanes did not wholly abandon his earlier formulation. We saw that in the other plays the powers of agricultural fertility were extended to include human sexuality, that Peace and her attendants were always personified as beautiful women, and that marriage served as the human counterpart of rural festival. Aristophanes now isolates the element of human sexuality, and concentrates the positive forces of fertility entirely within the realm of womanhood. Thus the life-principle, the essence of peace, works not merely through symbol or association, but takes on a voice of its own through the character of Lysistrata.

The result was an apparent revolution in the characterization of women on the comic stage. Jeffrey Henderson has remarked that heroines were a rarity in Old Comedy; it is even possible that *Lysistrata* was the first.¹¹ For our purposes a comparison with the earlier peace plays is instructive. Human sexuality was emphasized as an extension of agricultural fertility, but the women in those plays were largely symbolic, usually mute and little more than sex-objects. In the *Acharnians*, one thinks of the minimal roles of Dicaeopolis’ wife and daughter in his phallic procession (245–46 and possibly 253–56)—who are soon forgotten in his reverie of the slave girl Thratta (271–75); or of the squealing Megarian girls (780; 800–3); or of the silent bride (1056–66). In the *Peace* all three female characters are mute: Peace

¹¹ (Above, note 1) 169f., where he notes that of the dozen or so comedies which may have had female choruses, “only Pherekrates’ *Tyrannis* can be said to have had a female protagonist, though that is uncertain.” Various types of females are represented in Old Comedy; in private correspondence Prof. Henderson has cited the personified comoedia in Cratinus’ *Pytine*, Phrynichos’ burlesque *Andromeda* (*Clouds* 556 and sch. *ad loc.*) and Hyperbolos’ mother in Hermippos’ *Market-Women* (*Cl.* 557 and sch. *ad loc.*). None of these provides a model for the character of Lysistrata.

herself was undoubtedly represented by a statue, while Theoria and Opora are both the objects of sexual *double-entendres* based on their symbolic identities. The sexual potency of women is, of course, the mainspring of the *Lysistrata*, but Aristophanes has now endowed at least one female body with a mind that is not merely the equal but clearly superior to that of the men in the play. Just what inspired Aristophanes to create a female character of such prodigious mental and moral capacity remains conjectural; certainly nothing in the earlier plays gives us an inkling. Her stature is that of a tragic heroine, yet if such a positive model of womanhood existed in tragedy, Aristophanes affects not to know of it; such at least is the drift of *Thesm.* 545ff., where Euripides is accused of deliberately seeking out plots in which women appear wicked, while ignoring figures like Penelope. That criticism, comic though it is, seems generally valid, although Aristophanes himself might be deliberately ignoring Euripides' *Melanippe the Wise*, whose plot evidently combined the themes of motherhood and cleverness, and from which Aristophanes apparently borrowed a "feminist" statement to put in the mouth of Lysistrata (according to the scholiast on line 1125).¹² Aside from literary models, Aristophanes was undoubtedly aware that the current priestess of Athena Polias was named Lysimache (cf. *Lys.* 554).¹³ In any case the dramatic advantages of insisting on female superiority were obvious, as it offered extensive opportunities for comic reversal which are exploited to the full: the old women defeat the old men of the chorus, as Lysistrata's attendants beat the Skythian archers; the Proboulos is symbolically turned into a woman, and the ways of the *oikos* are favorably compared to those of the *polis*. This dramatic potential, springing as it does from the natural and perpetual source of male/female opposition, lends to the play a dynamic tension which was conspicuously lacking in the earlier peace plays, where the conflicts were resolved early on.

All this is not to overlook the ironic undertones of Lysistrata's superiority. The play is not so much a plea for women's rights as an indictment of men's incompetence. Nor are women exempt from the poet's mockery. All the stock charges against women (especially their fondness for drink and sex) are gleefully affirmed, often by the women themselves (cf. 12, 137–39, 708–9). Such passages serve their purpose; they raise a familiar laugh, and keep the play in touch with its audience. The Athenians would hardly have been receptive to a portrait of idealized womanhood, and Aristophanes, for whom all humanity was hilariously flawed, was hardly the man to provide it anyway. The superiority of Lysistrata simply offers the poet a novel rhetorical perspective from which to dramatize his familiar anti-war message.

Nevertheless, the creation of a "serious" female character does seem to have had a considerable effect on Aristophanes' art. I believe it is no coinci-

¹² I am indebted to Prof. Ruth Scodel for calling my attention to the *Melanippe*.

¹³ Cf. T. Gelzer, "Aristophanes" *RE* Suppl. XII, (1970) 1480–81, and Newiger (above, note 1) 235.

dence that women figure more prominently in Aristophanic comedy from 411 onwards. If we regard the *Lysistrata* as the major work of that year, and the *Thesmophoriazousae* as the minor, it is more probable that it was the *Lysistrata* which inspired the poet to expand on the male/female conflict. Again, the *Thesmophoriazousae*, for all its raucous humor at the expense of women, also contains much in their favor, including once more the insistence on female superiority (799–813), as well as two quite reverent choral songs (959–1000, 1136–59). In addition, it is likely that a second *Thesmophoriazousae* soon followed (ca. 408?).¹⁴ The *Ecclesiazousai* of course owes much to the *Lysistrata*, and even the modest female roles of the *Plutus* are an innovation compared to the extant pre-411 works.¹⁵ In the absence of dates and substantial fragments for the other plays of Old Comedy which may have dealt with this theme,¹⁶ we may fairly credit the *Lysistrata* with making the breakthrough in the comic characterization of women.

The impetus for this change, I maintain, was the post-Deceleian concentration of fertility theme within the realm of womanhood. The importance of this theme is reflected in the initial plot, where sex is to be the mechanism for the establishment of peace, as well as in a number of specific passages. A faint echo of the original complex may be perceived in the dousing of the old men by the old women, which is likened first to a bridal bath (*Lys.* 378) and then to “watering” so that the men will “sprout” (384).¹⁷ More characteristic for this play however are the references to child-bearing (cf. esp. 588–90, 651–52) which stress the crucial role of women in the life of the community, and the loss they suffer in war. It was just this projection of the fertility theme onto the purely human plane which allowed the poet to explore deeper levels of interaction than was possible in the earlier plays, levels which go far beyond basic fertility. Thus, the elaborate development of the *oikos*-theme¹⁸ owes much to the elevation of women above the status of fertility symbol. Even themes familiar from the earlier plays are used differently. References to festivals now emphasize not so much the importance of fertility as the contribution of women to the religious life of the polis (cf. esp. 640–47). In the *Lysistrata*, the institution of marriage is seen to be the very foundation of society; this is quite different from the promiscuous sexuality of the

¹⁴ Cf. *PCG* 182, which offers Geissler's date 407/6, and T. Gelzer (above, note 13) 1410, who suggests ca. 409.

¹⁵ Gilbert Murray in *Aristophanes: A Study* (Oxford 1933) 203–4, suggests that Chremylos' wife may be “the first comic female character in Greek literature . . . , the first woman who is made funny not because of her sex, but because of her character.”

¹⁶ Cf. note 11 above, and Whitman, (above, note 1) 212.

¹⁷ Cf. Henderson (above, note 1) 169f.

¹⁸ On this, cf. J. Vaio, “The Manipulation of Theme and Action in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*,” *GRBS* 14 (1973) 369–80, H. Foley, “The Female Intruder Reconsidered,” *CP* 77 (1982) 1–21, and Henderson (above, note 1) 185–86.

Acharnians, or from the transcendental type of Hieros Gamos presented at the end of the *Peace*.

This new focus on ordinary humanity also leads to the greater realism in the portrayal of war which has often been noticed in the *Lysistrata*.¹⁹ No more fanciful stories about Aspasia's prostitutes (*Ach.* 524–29) or the smoke-screen of Pheidias (*P.* 605–11); the origin of war is now simply money (*Lys.* 173–74, 421–23, 488–89). Even more striking is the willingness—now perhaps necessity—to present the effects of war in terms of human lives, not vines or fig trees. Repeated references to the absence of husbands on campaign (99–106, 523–24, 592) or to armed soldiers in the agora (555–64) or, most unusually, to the lonely lives of young women who will never marry (591–97), all strike home more directly than ever before. At one point even the unspeakable is almost spoken: Lysistrata protests that women's share in war is double because, after bearing sons and sending them off as hoplites—but she is mercifully cut short by the Proboulus: "Silence! Don't remind us!"—before she can complete the reference to death and burial (588–90). That tabu, if such it was, is ultimately broken by Lysistrata:

While the enemy builds up a Persian army
You kill Greek men and wreck Greek cities. (1133–34)

The male reaction is instinctive: "What's killing me is this erection!" (1136).²⁰

It is in the light of such a harsh juxtaposition that I interpret the Reconciliation scene, which begins at this point. The mute figure of Diallage, peace as sex-object, is clearly a throwback to the imagery of the earlier plays (cf. *Ach.* 989–99). Accordingly, she can be seen as the embodiment of full-bodied sexuality, the bestower of pleasure, the triumph of the life-instinct over the urge to destroy. Or, more consistently with our play's characterization of the male/female conflict, she can be seen as a gimmick, a symbolic trick, a convenient but superficial means of uniting men (who are throughout driven by self-gratification and indifference to the feelings of others) with the higher interests of peace, whose representatives are exclusively women. The Proboulus is deaf to Lysistrata's lessons in humanity; the old men give in but grudgingly to the old women's spontaneous acts of kindness, and the young men in this scene show not the slightest trace of insight into higher values, as the Athenian's response to Lysistrata's extraordinarily frank accusation makes clear. For them Diallage is raw sex and nothing more. It is significant that in this scene are found two explicit *double-entendres* equating agriculture and sex:²¹

¹⁹ Cf. O Seel, *Aristophanes oder Versuch über die Komödie*, (Stuttgart 1960) 79ff.; Whitman, (above, note 1) 206; Henderson (above, note 1) 200; Newiger (above, note 1) 233.

²⁰ Cf. earlier the similar response of the Proboulus to Lysistrata's sensitive pleas, 598.

²¹ The only other instance in the play occurs at 88f., where the Boeotian woman's private parts are compared to a plain of pennyroyal.

Pryt.: I'd like to strip naked and till her field!

Lak.: God, I'd sure like to go dung-gathering down there! (1173–74)

It is difficult to feel the vitality behind these lines that they might have had, say, in the *Peace*; deprived of the background of agricultural fertility, the remarks are merely isolated dirty jokes, with a decidedly leering edge. It is wrong to believe that the laughter they evoke is meant to cancel out the seriousness of Lysistrata's statements;²² to do that is to ignore precisely what is new and important in the presentation of peace and womanhood in favor of hackneyed stereotypes. If the men are incapable of understanding Lysistrata's deeper message, they are at least superficially brought into line: the life-principle does triumph after all. That their minds and hearts remain unenlightened perhaps reflects the political realities of the time; according to Thucydides, the more desperate the situation grew after Deceleia, the fiercer became the Athenians' fanatical will to win (*philonikia* 7.28.3). Aristophanes, for all his early bravado about the power of poetry, cannot have believed that his play would really stop the war.

And so the ending of the *Lysistrata*, like that of so many of Aristophanes' plays, is problematic. The apparent exuberance of the final songs seems to be undercut by the men's intransigence throughout and especially in Lysistrata's final scene. However, it is perhaps better to follow the dramatic sequence and say instead that any misgivings are supplanted by the sentiments of Panhellenic unity. Aristophanes' assertion of a happy end in the face of bleak reality is neither ironic sarcasm nor vapid escapism, but an expression of hope, however muted. His anti-war message was reduced finally to this: Sex conquers all. Ultimately, that may be enough to ensure survival, but here it is rather anticlimactic. Unlike her female predecessors, Lysistrata had much more than sex to offer.²³

²² As does N. Wilson, "Two Observations on Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*," *GRBS* 22 (1982), 157ff. Contrast Henderson (above, note 1) 212.

²³ For their generous assistance with this paper, a form of which was presented at the 1985 APA meeting in Washington DC, I would like to thank David Konstan and Jeffrey Henderson, who do not necessarily agree with all of my conclusions.