Lysistrata the warrior **8/09**

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Lysistrata is Aristophanes' great peace play, of course. Everyone knows that, even those who know very little else about Aristophanes; the play has been performed countless times as an act of protest against this, that or the other use of military force, from Vietnam to Iraq, and on one day in March 2003 there were twenty-six public readings of the play in the Chicago area alone as part of a worldwide protest action called the Lysistrata Project. Over the last seven years, the Oxford *Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama* records 44 productions of *Lysistrata* (or adaptations thereof) in all countries, nearly three times as many as for any other Aristophanic play and more than for the three old favourites, *Birds, Frogs* and *Clouds*, put together; and of course that means a good many more than 44 actual performances. And while the play's sexual theme no doubt accounts for some part of this popularity, it is likely to have been of very secondary significance; *Ecclesiazusae*, which also has a sexual theme, received just six productions. *Lysistrata* is a hit because it is thought of – along with that very different work, Euripides' *Trojan Women* – as *the* anti-war drama of antiquity, and its author – in the words of his finest present-day French interpreter, Pascal Thiercy – as "le grand poète pacifiste".

What I am going to argue here is that this has very little to do with anything in *Lysistrata* itself. I have no idea what Lysistrata's attitude, or Aristophanes', would have been to modern conflicts fought in a world whose politics, and whose technology, they could never have imagined in their wildest fantasies. But neither of them can reasonably be regarded as an unconditional opponent of war and violence *under all circumstances* (which is what I take "pacifist" to mean), or even as an unconditional advocate of ending the current war against Sparta.

To begin with the weaker claim. Well, for a start, Lysistrata herself is quite prepared to order the actual use of violence, as when she gives military orders to "four … companies of fully armed fighting women" (453-4) to attack the Scythian archers who are attempting to arrest her and her leading followers. And even her famous tactic of a sex-strike is no mere withdrawal of labour; it is presented as making itself effective through the infliction on the men of severe physical pain (845, 967, 1089-90) which is explicitly compared to the pain of someone undergoing one of the worse forms of torture (846). That enforced abstinence from sex (or rather from *marital* sex, this being the only kind over which the strikers have any control) could have such an effect is of course a comic

absurdity; the fact remains that in the play it *does* have this effect, and it is Lysistrata's intention that it should. She is as much applying physical coercion to the men as if she had led a besieging army to blockade and starve them, or as if she had sprayed their eyes with some non-lethal but painful chemical (that's not being anachronistic; it's suggested, as a tactic for naval warfare, by Euripides in the *Frogs*).

However, "that singular anomaly the violent pacifist" (to re-adapt a line of W.S. Gilbert's *Mikado* that has been adapted dozens of times before) is a figure that we are all familiar with and for whom we are usually prepared to make allowances; and there is certainly a big difference between the kinds of violence Lysistrata practises, which are never going to be fatal to anyone, and the kinds routinely practised in actual warfare. But then it turns out that Lysistrata isn't a straightforward hater of actual warfare, either.

Of course the women are consistently and passionately eager for the current war against Sparta to be brought to an end. There are, however, a considerable number of references in the play to military actions conducted in the past, or anticipated in the future, by the Athenian people and/or their allies against opponents *other* than Sparta. And *every one of these references is a favourable one.* And I am not talking here about remarks made by the bellicose (and often stupid) male characters who deride and resist the heroine and her supporters. I am talking about things that are said by Lysistrata herself, by her confederates, and later by Athenian and Spartan men who have accepted her demands and agreed to make peace with each other.

Most of these references are to past, or prospective, wars against Persia. To be sure, the Persian War of 480-479 was a defensive one, and it is likely, though it's not made explicit, that the future war against Persia envisaged in line 1133 is being thought of as defensive too. But to a genuine pacifist, that should be neither here nor there; and in any case the *first* time the women mention the Persian War, at 653, it is not as a patriotic struggle for independence but as a source of material gain, as having enabled Athens to enrich herself (probably referring to the tribute paid by her allies, many of whom had previously been paying it to the Persians). Later, too, when one of the Spartan men offers to sing a song "in honour of both the Athenians and ourselves", one might have expected him to choose a subject appropriate to the mood of the moment, which is one of convivial celebration; and he does indeed end (1262-72) by calling on Artemis to bless the newly-made peace treaty "with everlasting friendship and prosperity" – but up to that point his song has been about battle, about Athens' victory (rather generously so called) at Artemisium and Spartan heroism at Thermopylae.

Before that, in the course of her successful attempt to persuade the Athenians and Spartans to end their conflict, Lysistrata mentions other good services that the two cities had performed for each other in the past, for which each of them (she says) ought to feel gratitude and act accordingly. And each time, the service she recalls is a military one; and more than that, each time Lysistrata edits history to make the service more altruistic and/or more effective than in fact it was. The Athenian service to Sparta is Cimon's expedition in 462 to assist Sparta against the Messenians at Ithome (1138-44), which according to Lysistrata "saved all Lacedaemon"; in fact, even supposing (which is doubtful) that Sparta was still seriously threatened at that stage, Cimon *failed* to capture the rebel stronghold, and shortly thereafter the Spartans sent his army home in circumstances that made the whole affair a humiliation for Athens and especially for Cimon, who was ostracized at the next opportunity. The Spartan service to Athens was her military intervention in 510 to impose a regime change by overthrowing the tyrant Hippias; it is not mentioned that Sparta hoped and expected that this would lead to the installation of a friendly aristocratic regime, and that, when Cleisthenes established a democracy instead, Sparta intervened again to prevent this. Twice over, that is, Lysistrata twists and spins the facts to whitewash a military action of dubious motive or consequence.

This attitude of Lysistrata's is not in the least abnormal, for Aristophanes. There is no passage in any of his surviving plays in which any character expresses opposition to any past, present or prospective war against any opponent other than Sparta – *unless* that war either (i) has already ended in obvious failure or (ii) is being used as a stick with which to beat a politician whom the dramatist detests anyway for other reasons. The Sicilian expedition nicely illustrates both the exception and the rule. In *Lysistrata* it is recalled as an utter disaster; the decision to launch it was attended by evil omens, the politician who advocated it is cursed (391-7), and when Lysistrata mentions the suffering of mothers who sent their sons to fight as hoplites (589-590) – she would have said "never to see them again", and the Proboulos hastily interrupts her, but all he can say is "be quiet", because he has no counter-argument. But that is in *Lysistrata*, after it's all over. In *Birds*, when it is still in progress and the prospects look good, the only complaint anyone makes about the campaign is that Nicias is taking too long to win it (639). Elsewhere, not only the Persian War but sundry campaigns of imperial enforcement, at Naxos or Byzantium or on Euboea, are mentioned with pride, and Melos, scene of a massacre that was remembered as a stain on Athens' name for generations, becomes material for a cheery joke (*Birds* 186).

The other type of exception that I mentioned can be illustrated by the case of Hyperbolus in the second parabasis of *Knights* (1300-15). It was alleged – with what measure of truth, we have no idea – that at this time (425/4 BC) Hyperbolus was advocating a large naval expedition against Carthage, and the ships of the fleet are represented as being appalled by this proposal and ready to go to considerable lengths to frustrate it. What Aristophanes' opinion was about the political or strategic merits of such a scheme in the abstract, we cannot tell; what we *can* say is that he always expresses hostility to *anything* that he associates with the name of Hyperbolus. It has often been observed, indeed, that he likes to wind up a list of blessings by adding "… and getting rid of Hyperbolus" or words to that effect. So if Hyperbolus was the principal advocate of a particular campaign, Aristophanes (and most other comic dramatists, for that matter) could be guaranteed to be against it. That shows that they disliked Hyperbolus (or wanted to be perceived as disliking him); it shows nothing about their attitude to war.

Even if we confine our consideration to the war against Sparta, Lysistrata's strategy is decidedly hard-headed. Not for her the approach of the so-called peace women of Greenham Common, with whom she and her followers were famously compared by Tony Harrison in his play *The Common Chorus*; there is no thought of unilateral disarmament or unilateral concession. Instead, she takes no action until she has secured the agreement of women in the enemy states to take corresponding action, and even after they have not merely agreed but sworn to do so, she still does not trust them completely and takes all but one of their representatives as hostages (244) – while surrendering none herself. Clearly she is not seeking peace at any price. Can we say, at least symbolically, what her price actually is?

Well, before the peace treaty is finally agreed there is a short bout of negotiation between the leaders of the Athenian and Spartan delegations (1161-72). Now the negotiations are not designed for one moment to be thought of as a serious piece of diplomacy; the two sides' territorial claims are mapped out on the naked (or pseudo-naked) body of a personified feminine abstraction named Reconciliation, and the particular places mentioned are chosen for the sake of a series of ingenious and hilarious anatomical double entendres. Nevertheless, the scales of advantage are decidedly tilted. The Spartan makes the first demand, for Pylos (1164). The Athenian protests, but Lysistrata tells him to hand it over and "ask for another place in return for that one". He goes considerably further; he asks for *three* places – Echinus, the Malian Gulf, and the Long Walls of Megara (here called the Megarian Legs). Not surprisingly, the Spartan demurs. And what does Lysistrata do? She just says "Let it be – don't go quarrelling

about a pair of legs" (1172) – and that is the end of the negotiations. That last response of Lysistrata's has its verbs in the singular, not the plural, so it is addressed to only one of the two sides; I would have thought it obvious that it is the Spartan (the last previous speaker) who is being told to concede, but at least one astute scholar, the late Antonio López Eire (in a Spanish translation of 1994), has taken it the other way, so for the sake of argument I will accept that view. In that case, the Athenians are told to drop the third of their three demands, but they are given the other two, so they gain twice as much from the negotiations as the Spartans do; what is more, the place that is "given" to the Spartans, Pylos in Messenia, had been Spartan territory for three hundred years until captured by Cleon and Demosthenes in 425, whereas Echinus and the Malian Gulf had never been under Athenian control and they had held the Megarian Long Walls only for two short periods. That is from the geographical point of view. From the anatomical point of view, as all recent commentators observe, the Athenians are getting exactly what they desire, since their demand is for Reconciliation's vulva (and the surrounding district) while the Spartans, in accordance with the Athenian stereotype of Spartan sexual proclivities, want her anus, so that in the end both are satisfied (and say so, this time in agricultural language, in 1173-4) – but the Athenians will certainly feel that they have made the better bargain.

In other words, the peace Lysistrata makes, while both sides accept it, is a peace that gives more advantages to Athens than to Sparta. That was certainly not the kind of peace that anyone could remotely envisage as possible in the real world early in 411, little over a year after the Sicilian disaster. Not long afterwards, Peisander was trying to persuade the Assembly to recall Alcibiades from exile, negotiate an alliance with Persia and, if necessary, make major constitutional changes at Athens in order to get it. When he met fierce opposition on political and religious grounds, he challenged his opponents to explain "what possible hope of safety they had for the city" if his plan was not followed; none of them could find an answer (Thucydides 8.53.2-3). Not too long after that, when the Four Hundred had come to power (but without a Persian alliance, and without Alcibiades), Peisander discovered, not with pleasure, how right he had been, when the new regime sought to open negotiations with Sparta. Their first attempt came to nothing; sending an embassy to King Agis at Deceleia, they proposed peace on the basis of the *status quo*, but Agis replied that Athens' maritime empire must be disbanded. The negotiations broke down, and Agis marched on Athens, expecting to take it without a fight; on meeting resistance, he retreated, and began to encourage the Four Hundred to send a delegation to Sparta itself (Thucydides 8.70.2-71.3). It seems to have been some time before they actually did so, and when they did they made the blunder of sending it on a state trireme with a strongly democratic crew; the delegation

ended up in prison at Argos (Thucydides 8.86.9). Eventually, fearing (not without reason) that their fall was imminent, the Four Hundred sent a new, high-powered delegation post-haste to Sparta with instructions "at all costs to make any terms with the Spartans that were in any way endurable". According to Thucydides they had three negotiating positions: firstly, the terms that Agis had originally rejected, with Athens allowed to retain control of its allies; secondly, if this was refused, at least for Athens to be independent and retain its walls and fleet; and thirdly, if even that failed, they were willing to accept any terms at all, even including a Spartan occupation of Athens, if only they could save their own skins. They came home "having secured no agreement for everyone", which strongly suggests, as Donald Kagan has argued (*The Fall of the Athenian Empire* 192), that they *had* secured an agreement for themselves – in other words, the third option (Thucydides 8.90.2-91.3). But it was too late, both for them and for the Spartans, and they were overthrown by internal resistance.

That final fiasco doesn't in itself prove that the Spartans might not have made a better offer at an earlier stage; by the time of the final negotiations they must have felt that they would probably in any case be in control of Athens, directly or indirectly, within the month. But it is surely unimaginable that *before* the takeover by the Four Hundred, with Athens still democratic and Sparta believing it had the stronger navy and the prospect of Persian support, there would have been any chance at all of Sparta agreeing to a peace under which Athens would retain her maritime empire. And that, we may be sure, was the only peace that most Athenians would have been prepared to countenance; we may be sure of that because initially even the oligarchs, when this proposal was rejected by Agis, did not put forward their later Plan B (let alone Plan C) but simply withdrew from the negotiations. They knew that if they came back and said "We've been offered peace on condition that we give up the empire, and we're going to accept the offer", they wouldn't last a week. But that was the best offer they were likely to get. And a democratic Athens would be very lucky indeed even to get that much – unless and until it managed to change the odds by gaining a naval victory or two.

Lysistrata's peace was thus a fantasy, and everyone knew it. Indeed, this is admitted within the play itself. After the two hostile choruses of men and women are reconciled and combine into one, they make a series of Magnificent Free Offers to the audience (1043-71, 1188-1215) each of which is neatly nullified in the small print: you're all invited to dinner – but my front door will be shut; if your children are taking part in a procession, I'm happy for you to borrow all the fancy clothing and jewellery I own – only I don't own any; my servant has been ordered to hand out sacks of grain to all comers – but if you come anywhere near my door, beware of the dog! Those are the second, third

and fourth of the offers. The first one, translated into the terms of modern advertising, might come out something like this.

> Are you stuck for a spot of cash? Two or three hundred drachmas, say? Then come round to our place and just pick it up – and get a purse to put it in, absolutely free! (Terms and conditions apply. If peace ever comes, repayment of principal will not be required.)

What sounded like a gift has turned out to be a loan, and an interest-bearing loan at that. It does seem to have one redeeming feature: the debt will be cancelled "if peace ever comes". But remember, these offers are all meant to be, in the end, worthless. The presupposition must therefore be that peace will either never come at all, or will take so long that by that time the lender will have got his money back, perhaps several times over, in the form of interest (rate not stated, but even a respectable banker might charge 36% on high-risk loans: Lysias, fragment 1). That is the chorus's, and the audience's, actual expectation, once they leave the theatre.

The objective of the play, therefore, is emphatically not to encourage the Athenians to take political or other action aimed at ending the war. The prospect of such action being successful was, and was known to be, not measurably different from zero. Unless, that is, you were a supporter of oligarchy, and hoped or expected, as the Four Hundred did, that the Spartans would offer better terms to an oligarchic regime than to "the untrustworthy *demos*" (Thucydides 8.70.2); but whatever may have been Aristophanes' actual views on *that* subject, he never expresses explicitly anti-democratic sentiments, or allows any sympathetic character to do so, in this play or in any other, and indeed all but makes Lysistrata claim (falsely), in commendation of the Spartans, that they were responsible for the creation of Athenian democracy in the first place (1156). Rather, as is often the case in Old Comedy, the objective is to transport the audience into a dream world, where benevolent gods aid a determined human hero (or, as in this case, heroine) to rescue Athens or Greece or humanity from a perilous predicament.

The gods, or rather goddesses, who aid Lysistrata's campaign are three in number. The first, and least important, is Artemis, who is of course among other things a goddess of chastity. Of the four women (if it is four) who confront the Proboulos in 435-448, two swear their defiance by Artemis (435, 447) and a third by Hecate (Phosphoros) who is sometimes identified with her (443); in her celebrated non-seduction scene with Cinesias, Myrrhine too swears twice by Artemis (922, 949); the Spartan's song celebrating the Persian War and the new peace treaty ends with a prayer to Artemis

Agrotera (1262-72), and a subsequent cletic (invocation) hymn, probably sung by Lysistrata herself, summons Artemis first among the major deities (1280); in addition, we are reminded indirectly of Artemis twice, once when the women are compared to Artemisia, the queen of Halicarnassus who fought at Salamis (675), and once when the Spartan sings of the battle of Artemisium (1251).

Secondly, and not surprisingly, Aphrodite, whose power is invoked at three crucial moments. Lysistrata begins her main speech in the *agon* (551-2) by expressing her confidence that the women will triumph "so long as sweet-souled Eros and Cyprus-born Aphrodite breathe desire over our bosoms and our thighs", and the first cry of support she receives from another woman is an oath in the name of "Paphian Aphrodite" (556); the first sight of a man in distress owing to the sex-strike (or, as Lysistrata puts it, "crazed and possessed by the secret rites of Aphrodite" (832) (rites which, as he later reminds his wife (898), she has not practised for a long time) causes her to pray to the "mistress of Cyprus and Cythera and Paphos" (833-4); and in the final cletic hymn, while all the gods are invited to *witness* the new-made peace, it is Aphrodite who is credited with actually *making* it (1290). And elsewhere, the women swear by Aphrodite in six passages scattered through the play (208, 252, 556, 749, 858, 939).

But the goddess who truly dominates this play, as everyone familiar with it knows, is Athena. When the setting is established (at about line 240), it is the west front of Athena's citadel, the Acropolis, and there is special mention of features like the Nike bastion (317) and the Promachos statue (751ff). In and around the *parodos* alone, the goddess is mentioned eight times, notably when the Acropolis is occupied (241) and when the women's chorus come to repel the men's attack on it (341-9); and she is also prominent in the Spartan song that concludes the play (at least as we have it), in her Spartan guise as Athena Chalkioikos (1299, 1320-1). Most importantly of all, perhaps, as David Lewis first saw (*Annual of the British School at Athens* 50 [1955] 1-12), the heroine herself has a name, and to some extent a role, reminiscent of Lysimache, the current priestess of Athena Polias, to whom she explicitly compares herself and her followers at the beginning of her *agon* speech (554); and I have argued elsewhere (on pp.302-3 of the addenda to my 2001 edition of *Wealth*) that at the end of the play she is assimilated more closely to Athena herself and may even – as the priestess sometimes did – wear the goddess's distinctive garment, the aegis. This helps to explain why the gods summoned in the cletic hymn 1279-90 include Artemis and Apollo, Dionysus, Zeus and Hera, and by implication Aphrodite, but not Athena: because Athena is already there.

Athena can be a reconciler and unifier (as she is famously in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*), but she is also, especially at Athens, a warrior goddess – indeed *the* warrior goddess – and this is certainly not forgotten in the play. Indeed in the text as we have it the very last word is *pammakhon* "able to fight any foe", as an epithet of Athena, and while it is likely that this word is not in its correct place (in its present position it plays havoc with the metre), it almost certainly still belongs in the final line. And it should be remembered, too, that while the name of her priestess, Lysimache, can reasonably be read as "she who resolves strife" (and is, indeed, so read in Aristophanes' earlier play, *Peace* [992], as well as in this one), the actual name of the heroine, Lysistrate, would probably in the normal run of things be understood as meaning not "she who *disbands* armies", i.e. the peacemaker, but "she who *scatters* armies", i.e. puts enemies to flight – with a recollection of one of Athena's own epithets, *Phobesistrate* "she who *routs* armies".

Of course Athenians in 411 wanted the war to end. But as we have seen, most of them still regarded as unthinkable any terms for ending it that did not preserve their right to control, and raise revenue from, the states in their alliance; and since many of these states had already *de facto* seceded (though some had since been reconquered), the very bottom line of acceptability would be the *status quo* – which, as we have also seen, there was no chance of their being offered. (They *were* offered it in 410, after their crushing naval victory at Cyzicus – and they rejected it: Diodorus Siculus 13.52-53.)

Lysistrata does considerably better. She coerces the Athenian males, but she also arranges for the coercion of the Spartan males; and as the Spartan Lampito had envisaged from the start (168-171), it is in fact the Spartans who crack first. After the long scene in which Cinesias is tantalized and tormented by his wife, he still does not say he is ready to make peace, and it is the Spartans who make the first approach to seek a settlement. During Lysistrata's speech to the two delegations, both leaders are repeatedly distracted by the beauty of Reconciliation, but it is only the Spartan who is so far gone as to admit that his city is in the wrong (1148). And as we have seen, in the arguments over territorial issues the Athenians get the better of it – perhaps by a wider margin than I have cautiously assumed. Lysistrata in that final scene is usually, and rightly, thought of as a neutral figure above the conflict. But she is certainly, from an Athenian point of view, the right kind of neutral. How could she not be? She is Athenian herself, and she also represents the goddess who was Athens' very own, even if she *was* also worshipped at Sparta. And the peace that she creates is a peace that most Athenians, in the circumstances of 411, would be more than happy with, a peace *better* than they could have gained by normal diplomatic means. It is also a pipe dream.

I am not saying that Aristophanes the man did not strongly desire an end to the war with Sparta – probably a good deal more strongly than most of his fellow-citizens, to judge from the strong contrast between his approach to wars against Sparta and his approach to all other wars. Nor am I saying that Aristophanes the dramatist was not to some extent hoping to persuade his audience to take a similar view. All I am saying is that he neither believed, nor wished his audience to believe, that war was invariably, or even usually, a terrible evil to be avoided at all costs, and that even when Sparta was the enemy, nothing in any of his plays suggests that he would have accepted a peace that did not leave Athens free to maintain her empire and indeed, where there was a good prospect of success, to expand it. And what is true for him is also true for his creation, Lysistrata: neither of them ever forgets that it takes two to make a peace.