Best Laid Plans: The Uniform Plot of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*

The plot of *Lysistrata* relies on a pair of logical and dramatic conundrums. First, the women of Greece have been abandoned by their husbands, who are away fighting in the Peloponnesian War. In response, the women propose two plans: one (Plan A) to win the men back home by depriving them of sex until they agree to peace (*Lysis.* 124-239). But since the men are abroad on campaign, they would not even be aware of the strike, much less persuaded by it to settle the conflict (Vaio 1973: 369). Nevertheless, in addition to their sex strike, the women add a separate plan to bring about peace (Plan B): the occupation of the Acropolis (*Lysis.* 175-179). Questions surrounding the relationship between these two plans form the play's second conundrum. If the strike aims to end the war, why should the occupation be necessary (Hulton 1972: 32-33)? A common scholarly explanation for both plans has been to dismiss their practical implausibility as a standard feature of Old Comedy (Henderson 1987: 76, Hulton 1972: 35) and to argue that Plan B's very presence in the play sacrifices a soundly-constructed plot in order to develop the theme of the women on the Acropolis (Hulton 1972: 35) or to illustrate the war's destructive effect on domestic life (Konstan 1995: 48).

In this paper I assert that contrary to scholarly claims above, Plans A and B do indeed work in concert in that the sex strike (Plan A) depends on the occupation of the Acropolis (Plan B). The intended goal and actual effect of Plan B is to bring the men home so that Plan A may be carried out. Once the women usurp the seat of the Athenian government and its treasury, Athens will be unable to continue its costly involvement in the Peloponnesian War. The soldiers will then return home to their wives, intending to reclaim the treasury and continue to wage war against Sparta. However, their intentions will then be countered with the sex strike, which will

torment the men into surrendering to their wives and force the former to strike a peace agreement.

Furthermore, I argue that both plans unfold according to Lysistrata's intentions as first expressed in the play's Prologue (*Lysis*. 1-253). Plan B does not set the stage for Plan A by chance, but in accordance with Lysistrata's tactical vision and meticulous planning that manipulates expected behavior in the private and public spheres. When Lysistrata shares the idea behind Plan A with her conspirators-to-be in the prologue, she has them swear an oath of abstinence that names the household as its theater (*Lysis.* 149, 161). However, this motif of the private home is then temporarily abandoned for the civic center of the Acropolis before Lysistrata and her followers succeed in imbuing the Acropolis with a domestic character, such that it becomes a suitable place for the oath of abstinence, in all its domestic specificity, to be carried out successfully by the women (*Lysis.* 150, 160, 217-220, 229-232). This transformation of the Acropolis into a home – when viewed alongside Lysistrata's heavily home-centered instructions from the prologue's oath – reveals a linear continuity in Lysistrata's complex plan for peace.

As I intend to demonstrate, the plot of *Lysistrata* is far from illogical or disharmonious, since the apparently separate Plans A and B, in fact, work synergistically, with the former depending on the latter. The cooperative relationship between the two plans ought to be read as two phases of a single plan authored by Lysistrata to effect a Pan-Hellenic peace.

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