

Playing the Woman Card: Gender Identity and Social Exclusion in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*

Scholars have remarked on the lack of concrete details available in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* about its heroine and namesake. In a comedy about the interplay between the Greek family and political power, it is surprising that Lysistrata's husband is mentioned only once (*Lysis*. 513-514), and that Aristophanes furnishes her with so little personal detail. Some scholars (Henderson 1987, Faraone 2006, and Gilhuly 2009) entertain the possibility of a connection between Lysistrata and the priestess of Athena Polias in 411 BC, the time of the play's production. But in a play that explores social and gender stereotypes, Henderson points out that Lysistrata seems to be the only character in the play who is not identified exclusively with one gender or social group (1987: xxxvi-xxxvii). She is neither a young wife nor an elderly matron, neither a man involved in politics nor a soldier. Henderson suggests her elastic nature may resemble that of Athena herself, who rejected the role of wife and mother by adopting a more martial and masculine persona (1987: xxxix). Furthermore, Gilhuly (2009: 140) and Faraone (2006: 208-209) posit that Lysistrata may represent two types: the priestess Lysimache, and a prostitute in her role as a madam who controls access to sex.

This paper argues that Lysistrata does not participate fully in or pledge allegiance to any particular social or gender group but, instead, assumes various qualities and characteristics from each to fulfill her personal aim: to end the war. She insinuates herself with each group just enough to manipulate them for her peacemaking ends: she encourages the young women to swear off sex (*Lysis*. 124-180), the old women to take the Acropolis (*Lysis*. 320-386), and finally the men to make treaties to sue for peace (*Lysis*. 1112-1186). Unlike Henderson who claims a one-to-one correspondence between Lysistrata and Athena, I demonstrate that there is added nuance in the comparison. While Lysistrata may engage in masculine and warlike deeds, she

simultaneously challenges and subverts male authority, as in her argument with the προβούλοι (*Lysis*. 430-610), whereas Athena's divine spheres invest her more firmly in the patriarchal tradition. And, because Lysistrata associates with male- and female-identified groups indiscriminately, to identify her as a priestess and prostitute, as Gilhuly and Faraone argue, does not sufficiently define her multidimensional character.

As a consequence of her slippery nature, Lysistrata often suffers exclusion and ridicule by those very groups she associates with to hatch her plan. While she often identifies herself as a woman ("Ἡδ' ἐγώ, "I am she," *Lysis*. 94) and attends meetings of the wives where men would not be permitted (*Lysis*. 69-253), those very women exclude her in their treatment of her as a pariah. Similarly, the men reject her from their ranks as male decision makers because they do not view her as a male citizen. Lysistrata, then, assumes qualities of several groups, but is never identified with any one exclusively.

As I intend to demonstrate, Lysistrata cannot be categorized confidently into any prescribed social or gender group. Nevertheless, she relates to each group enough to manipulate them for her peace plan, which requires that she never be indoctrinated fully into the ranks of any one specific social or gender group. Her protean nature proves to be a fundamental component to the successful execution of her plan for peace.

Bibliography

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