

Teaching the Classical Reception Revolution

6. Precarity and Protest: The politics of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*

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The experience of incorporating a student production of *Lysistrata* into my teaching at the University of Warwick, where I was a Senior Teaching Fellow in Classics and Ancient History during 2015-16, and of making connections between the play's account of political activism and contemporary protest movements, provided an opportunity to reflect on possibilities for teaching classical civilisation and connecting the classical past with the present. While analogies between politics ancient and modern are rarely straightforward or unproblematic, they can enable audiences to engage with ancient culture and perhaps better enable under-represented groups to associate the cultural capital of antiquity with their own political concerns.¹

¹ On this topic, see Susan Deacy's comments on students' perceptions of Classics in her paper 'Black Athena and the Classical Classroom'.

Aristophanes' play was central to the undergraduate cultural history module on 'Sexuality and Gender in Antiquity' I taught. Fortuitously, it was also the play produced for last year's Warwick Drama Day, a large-scale outreach event organised by the Department of Classics and Ancient History, in which local schools attend a student performance of a classical play and hear talks from the faculty's teaching staff.² Productions of the *Lysistrata* belong to a great tradition; the *Lysistrata* has often been restaged and re-performed as an act of political protest, and its invocation of cultural memories of political unrest and the occupation of culturally significant space resonates with the histories of other conflicts.³

During the Drama Day I lectured to visiting groups on the political context of the *Lysistrata* at its first performance, and explored the way in which the play both responds to current events in its structure and content, and evokes cultural memory of violent political change through its explicit re-enactment of a key moment in the development of Athenian democracy, the battle for the Acropolis documented by Herodotus in 508/7 BCE, a century before the play's production.⁴ Herodotus' account already contains gender conflict, with the priestess of Athena on the Acropolis warning the Spartan occupier; the Acropolis itself is the disputed location in this earlier account (Parker 1998: 2-3), and the character Lysistrata has long been associated with the historical priestess of Athena.⁵

Radical movements such as Occupy and liberation movements across the world have made the physical occupation of culturally significant space an important mode of political engagement. Judith Butler's recent thought on the political power generated by such collective action, on mourning and grief in times of war, the legitimisation of spontaneous collective political action by the marginalised and precarious, offers new perspectives on the politics of the *Lysistrata*. The protests and counter-protests Aristophanes depicts in classical Athens resembled those explored by Butler.⁶ Butler herself draws on Hannah Arendt's concept of the 'space of appearance' of collective action but emphasises the importance of the body in participating in such action.⁷ The Athenian women's protests illustrate Butler's insistence on the physicality of performative protest through both the occupation and repurposing of civic space and the emphasis on the body generated by the sex-strike's political appropriation of the comic

² The Warwick *Lysistrata* can be seen at https://youtu.be/BYY88WNC_1Q. The day was organised by Dr Michael Scott, with contributions from many colleagues and students.

³ See Dutsch, D. (2015) 'Democratic Appropriations: *Lysistrata* and Political Activism', in Boshier, K., Macintosh, F., McConnell, J. and Rankine, P. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 575-94.

⁴ Herodotus 5.72, and the Aristotelian *Constitution of the Athenians* 20; see also Ober, J. (1996), 'The Athenian Revolution of 508/7 B.C.: Violence, Authority, and the Origins of Democracy', in *The Athenian Revolution: essays on ancient Greek democracy and political theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 32-52.

⁵ Henderson, J. (ed.), (1990) *Aristophanes: Lysistrata* (Oxford: Clarendon), xxxviii-xl; Robert Parker (1998) *Cleomenes on the Acropolis: an inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 12 May 1997* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

⁶ Judith Butler's analysis of the social effects of war and of economic precarity are developed over a series of books, including *Prekarious Life: the powers of mourning and violence* (2004, London: Verso), *Frames of War: when is life grievable?* (2009, London: Verso) and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

⁷ Arendt, H. (1998) *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 198-99; Butler, *Performative Theory*, 75-78.

phallus. Butler's theory helps to explain the connection between the 'occupation' and 'sex-strike' themes of the play, sometimes seen as 'largely independent of each other'.⁸

Teaching revolution

The Legacy of Greek Political Thought network invited speakers on this panel to reflect on their experiences of teaching as early career academics. Participating in a large-scale outreach event offered both an opportunity and a challenge: the chance to engage with new audiences, and the difficulty of losing teaching time and focus. A specific challenge for temporary lecturers and anyone new to a department is working out how to fit events like this into a course schedule that has little room for manoeuvre. With helpful advice from my established colleagues I had already made Aristophanic comedy central to a section on performing gender within the polis, and made the play the topic for the following week's discussion seminars. As most of the students had either participated in or watched the play, they knew it better than they would have done from simply skimming a text or reading extracts during class.

Integrating the Drama Day into my teaching enabled my students to incorporate the performance and responses to it – the creation of their own reception of the play as performers and audience – into their studies. This proved to be fruitful in many ways. Performers could speak to their experiences on stage, we could compare Clive Letchford's in-house translation used for the performance with published ones, and analyse decisions made by the student director and production team (several of whom were also students on the Sex and Gender module). Such performance-based teaching methods are bread-and-butter to drama specialists (and my Warwick colleague Emmanuela Bakola has now launched an 'Ancient Greek Theatre' module which incorporates drama workshops along with close textual study), but perhaps less usual in cultural history.

Two of my aims in teaching the Sex and Gender module were to explore ways in which classical Greek drama, myth and art confronted and collapsed apparently rigid gender binaries of Athenian life, and to challenge the scholarly construction and maintenance of binary oppositions. The inversions and transformations of Aristophanic comedy attack and subvert fixed ideas of the separation of genders, demonstrating both slippage between genders and responses to it. In discussion, students drew on their collective memory of the *Thesmophoriazusae*, Warwick's 2015 play, as well as their experience of the *Lysistrata*, to compare the two Aristophanic plays. They considered how threats of sexual aggression from the *Lysistrata*'s male characters were defused in being performed by female actors, one of the student team's more interesting casting decisions. What had it been like for the female student who donned an inflatable phallus to play Kinesias, the frustrated husband? Director and actor shared their thoughts on the experience. Was the objectification of Lampito, the Spartan woman, and Reconciliation, the mute character of the closing scene, rendered less problematic by the objectified bodies being those of young men? The production's cross-gender casting, we concluded, paid homage to ancient practice and the themes of the play.

Diversity and Classics

In his piece in this collection, Luke Richardson draws attention to the precarity of specialists in classical reception in seeking employment in traditional Classics departments, and to related

⁸ Konstan, D. (1995) *Greek Comedy and Ideology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 50, cf. Vaio, J. (1973), 'The Manipulation of Theme and Action in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*', *GRBS*, 14 (4), 369-80.

problems of access and diversity to classical subjects. Discussing the Warwick Drama Day enabled me to offer an account of the department's outreach and engagement work, and to show how it made Classics accessible through teaching in translation. The cast of *Lysistrata* embodied the vitality and diversity of our student body, further demonstrating to the performance's diverse audience of school students that classical subjects were being studied now by students who looked and sounded like them, and that classical culture engaged with issues that were relevant to their own experiences.

The *Lysistrata* itself has inspired a great many performances and retellings, often diverging from or updating its details while retaining the central concept of the sex-strike. It is also often used to analogise and familiarise women's protests, even when Aristophanes' play is not a direct inspiration or necessarily even known to the protesters, as Dorota Dutsch and Helen Morales have shown. Labelling 'sex-strikes' as performances derived from the *Lysistrata* inverts the usual processes of classical reception, and may itself represent as a form of colonialism, as with coverage of women's protests, led by Leymah Gbowee, during the Second Liberian civil war of 1999-2003).⁹

However, the opposite process occurred with Spike Lee's 2015 film *Chi-Raq*. Lee used the plot and characters of the *Lysistrata* to present another divided city, Chicago, with the gang violence that has ended so many young lives in the city replacing the conflict between Athens and Sparta. In his version of the story, the dual role of the women as mourners and agents of political change, using their sexuality to achieve the goal of a united city and a safer community, is explored through a range of female characters representing different facets of Aristophanes' characters. Spike Lee's portrayal of women's sexuality in his films, from *She's Gotta Have It* onwards, has been criticised, and Aristophanes' own games with Athenian stereotypes of women's sexuality, as the Athenian women debate their planned sex-strike, provide a comparator for thinking about the intersection of race and gender in hypersexualised characterisations.¹⁰

When I played the film's trailer to the Sex and Gender class, the presentation of classical material through contemporary music, rap and dance generated instant engagement. *Chi-Raq* provided a reminder that ancient texts can speak to modern issues in powerful ways, and that there is an underlying sadness to Aristophanes' play that is sometimes lost when the bawdy humour becomes the focus of performance and analysis.¹¹

Athenian politics in the *Lysistrata*

Much of the reception and performance history of the *Lysistrata* has focused on the sex, and sexual politics, rather than the Athenian politics, more obscure to and less amusing for modern audiences. But as Douglas Olson noted in his careful exploration of the play's political context, it shows evidence of the 'confused and ambiguous situation in Athens in mid-412 BCE or so',

⁹ Morales, H. (2013), 'Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, the Liberian "sex strike", and the Politics of Reception', *GR*, 60(2), at 281-95. 282-86; Dutsch, *Democratic Appropriations*, 585-86. The Liberian women's movement and the end of the civil war are the subject of *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (Gini Reticker, 2008); see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1202203/>.

¹⁰ See Morales, H. (2015), '(Sex) Striking Out: Spike Lee's *Chi-raq*', *Eidolon*. <https://eidolon.pub/sex-striking-out-spike-lee-s-chi-raq-f18fe17dd86b#.3urc2v2sn>. *She's Gotta Have It*, Spike Lee, 1986, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0091939/>.

¹¹ *Chi-Raq*, Spike Lee, 2015, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4594834/>.

and the political climate in which the oligarchic coup became possible, rather than offering an explicit commentary on those events.¹² The play lacks the obvious caricatures of named politicians seen in comedies from the 420s – there is no buffoonish Cleon, and even the officious Proboulos remains unnamed and unidentified. At the likely date of the play's composition, with defeat in Sicily a recent memory and political leaders such as Peisander starting to express the positions that would lead to the 411 BCE oligarchic revolution, the precarious state of Athenian democracy meant that those jokes simply weren't funny anymore. (A less charitable reading might be that Aristophanes was seeking to divert attention from the leaders of the forthcoming oligarchic coup).

Lysistrata explains that the occupation of the Acropolis has taken place precisely to thwart Peisander's desire for office (*Lys.* 490-91), but neither he nor other politicians receive the kind of individualised abuse meted out to Cleon and his contemporaries in earlier plays. In the Proboulos' complaints about women's protests, we hear women's voices outside the assembly bewailing Adonis as Demostratus argues for the Sicilian expedition inside (391-398); Demostratus is 'loathsome' and 'hostile to the gods' but these are not the linguistically inventive insults that one might expect from Aristophanic invective. Cleisthenes, an Athenian represented by Aristophanes as effeminate, is invoked as a possible intermediary between the women and the Spartans (620-621), just as he intermediates between male and female Athens in the *Thesmophoriazusae*.

The students' staging of the *Lysistrata* demonstrated the play's thorough and consistent spatial politics; in questioning who is entitled to occupy certain spaces, it questions who participates in politics. Aristophanes skilfully uses the geography of the city and analogies for its social divisions to represent a city that is politically divided. Political space is highly marked, with the slopes of the Acropolis, on which much of the action takes place, dividing men from women just as they usually demarcated the boundaries between sacred and civic space, between autochthonous founders and everyday Athenians. This space between the divided worlds of men and women serves both as a private space, the ersatz *oikos* in which Cinesias and Myrrhine spar, and as a public space within the *polis*, as the two half-choruses confront each other.

The women's arrival in public and seizure of public space marks the beginning of the confusion of the usually separate domestic and civic spaces. In the opening scene, they leave their houses, difficult though that is for women:

Lysistrata: Now if someone had invited them to a revel for Bacchus, or to Pan's shrine, or to Genetyllis' at Colias, the streets would be impassable, what with their tambourines. But as it is, there's not a single woman here. Except that my neighbour here's coming out (*exerchetai*). Good morning, Calonice...

Calonice: Honey, they'll be along. You know, it's a lot of trouble for wives to get out of the house (*exodos*)... (*Lys.* 1-6, 15-16, translation Henderson)¹³

The movement outwards (*exodos*) is emphasised. The normal male citizen business of public space becomes impossible as the women occupy the Acropolis; they cannot get to the treasury

¹² Olson, S.D. (2012), 'Lysistrata's Conspiracy and the Politics of 412 BC', in C.W. Marshall and D. Kovacs (eds.), *No Laughing Matter* (London: Bristol Classical Press), 69-82, at 69-70.

¹³ Translations from Henderson, J. (ed.), (2014), *Aristophanes: Birds. Lysistrata. Women at the Thesmophoria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

to take out funds for the war. Lysistrata's extended analogy between civic politics and wool-working further collapses the distinction; the private work of women becomes the same as the public work of men, with the polis as 'a fleece just shorn' (*Lys.* 574), and the end of the division benefits the city. Butler too argues for the power of collapsing this distinction:

Politics is not defined as taking place exclusively in the public sphere, distinct from the private one, but it crosses those lines again and again, bringing attention to the way that politics is already in the home, or on the street, or in the neighbourhood. (Butler 2015: 71)

For Butler, the long-term public presence of radical protest movements, such as the Tahrir Square protests in Egypt, and the transfer of private, domestic activities into the public space of the city, make an impact:

It was only when those needs that are supposed to remain private came out into the day and night of the square, formed into image and discourse for the media, that it finally became possible to extend the space and time of the event with such tenacity as to bring the regime down. (Butler 2015: 98)

Myrrhine turns the slopes of the Acropolis not just into an *oikos* but its most private recesses. The traditional comic costume of the phallus, emphasised through the play in reference to the men's sexual frustration as the sex-strike takes hold, represents the domestic and private made public.

Aristophanes' use of the theme of occupation itself is an act of reception, in its evocation of cultural memories of the 'Athenian Revolution' of 508 BCE. The women's occupation evokes memories of earlier political crises, notably the previous defence of the city by Athenians against the Spartans, that resulted in Cleisthenes' reforms, and is seen by Ober as the originary moment of Athenian democracy, a mass act of revolution rather than a process driven by a single founder figure or law-giver. It is the male chorus who make this theme explicit:

Not even Cleomenes, the first to occupy this place, left here intact. No, for all he breathed the Spartan spirit, he left without his weapons – surrendering to me! – with only a little bitty jacket on his back, starving, filthy, unshaven, unwashed for six whole years. (*Lys.* 271-282)

That the occupation of spaces such as the Acropolis has a special significance can be seen in the more recent history of Greece; in my lecture I showed pictures of more recent occupations, from World War II and the recent and continuing Greek economic and political crisis. The occupation of spaces of significance in the construction of national identity continues to influence cultural memory, whether through the memories in *Lysistrata* or the photographs of more recent history.

But there are ambiguities. The scruffy retreating Spartan king Cleomenes seems not that dissimilar from the Athenian mythical figure Melanion (the original 'black hunter'), whose story the male chorus will later tell:

I want to tell you all a tale that once I heard when but a lad. In olden times lived a young man named Melanion. In flight from marriage he went off to the wilderness and lived in the mountains and kept a dog and wove traps and hunted rabbits; but he never went home again because of his hatred. That's how much he loathed women. And, being wise, we loathe them just as much as Melanion did. (*Lys.* 781-97)

Unpacking the occupation theme, however, reveals the complexities of Aristophanic politics. The women occupying the Acropolis do not necessarily represent democratic Athenians, but the occupying Spartans (and hence their welcoming of the Spartan Lampito starts to look suspicious) and proto-oligarchs, as the men's chorus leader insinuates:

Actually, this plot they weave against us, gentlemen, aims at tyranny! (*Lys.* 630).

The democratic rhetoric of Aristophanes' text is that of the male chorus, unattractive and misogynist though their appeal to civic myths such as the story of Melanion is. Just as the protest is written on the male body not the female, the political concerns voiced by the male chorus are significant and link the comic performance of politics with its historical context; they are the ones recalling past threats to political stability, and the violence in which democracy was established, identifying the women's protest with past Athenian tyranny (616-19). The insistence on the language of tyranny suggests that these references are more than comic exaggeration:

I think I smell much bigger trouble in this, a definite whiff of Hippias' tyranny!

When the city is reunified at the end of the play, with Acropolis and town, man and woman, household and city recombining, the choruses combine before the formal negotiations of the individual characters are concluded.

Afterword

This paper was first given in a climate of political change and tension as the impact of the EU referendum on UK politics was becoming more clear. Subsequent events across the world have reminded us that, like the Athenians, we cannot take the stability of democracy and political praxis in their familiar forms for granted.

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* is therefore a play for 2016 and 2017 just as it was for 412 and 411 BCE. The 2016 US election campaign raised question about the treatment of individual women as political actors and of women collectively. Butler's assessment of the authority of self-created mass protest by the marginalised and excluded is exemplified in the protests of *Lysistrata* and the Athenian women, and their occupation of public space as their own domestic space; Butler herself has identified a new need for protest:¹⁴

Only a broad-based mobilization, a form of embodied and transnational courage, we might say, will successfully defeat xenophobic nationalism and the various alibis that now threaten democracy. (Salmon 2016)

The protests of the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring that inspired Butler's argument have now been echoed by the Women's March on Washington and the continuing protests. Whether Americans can follow the Athenian citizens in reintegrating their community and celebrating their shared life, rather than following the isolated path of the misogynist Melanion, remains to be seen. But Aristophanes' play provides a model for the reintegration of divided political communities in the pursuit of a shared common good.

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¹⁴ Salmon, C. (2016) 'Trump, fascism, and the construction of "the people": An interview with Judith Butler', Verso Books Blog, published 29/12/2016. <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3025-trump-fascism-and-the-construction-of-the-people-an-interview-with-judith-butler>