

## The Many Faces of Lysistrata

When some expert transvestite male actor first donned the mask and costume of Lysistrata in 411 BC, he was making theatre history. This is by the most important female role that Aristophanes had so far composed, whether measured in terms of the number of lines, the variety of vocal and physical performance styles required by the role, or the moral and political authority which Lysistrata seems able to exert over women, men, Athenians and Spartans alike. But Lysistrata is also a sophisticated and complex figure, who shares features with several other women both in Greek myth and cult and in social reality.

The standard mythical picture of ancient Greek women in wartime depicts them as passive victims of male violence, cowering behind the walls of Troy or Thebes to await the siege of their city and enslavement. But there were plenty of assertive women in Greek myth who provide precedents for some of Lysistrata's spunky leadership qualities. The motif of the sex strike that Lysistrata proposes and implements is already present in a story told in a short epic called *The Shield of Heracles*: Alcmena refused to have sexual intercourse with her husband until he had avenged the death of her brothers by burning down two enemy villages (4-19). Alcmena refused sex in order to create war, where Lysistrata suggests that only sexual deprivation can bring about peace. But as sex-strike initiator she has a forebear in the epic tradition.

The Aristophanic comedy can also be illuminated by the parallel provided by its plot with the various matriarchies – societies run by women rather than men – to be found in Greek myth. The story of the Lemnian women is implicitly referred to in the play in jokes about bad smells and fire (66-8, 296-301), and of course the women of the island of

Lemnos, led by their queen Hypsipyle, had been afflicted with a bad body odour problem. As a result their husbands had become unfaithful. So the women had risen up, killed the men, and taken over the island. Aristophanes' audience knew about this story from both epic and tragedy, and were therefore familiar with the basic plotline featuring a takeover of the state by women. An even more obvious parallel is drawn in the comedy with the Amazons, the mythical warrior-women who had long ago invaded Athens and were depicted on the shield held by the great statue of Athena herself on the acropolis (Pausanias 1.17.2). They were also to be seen in a famous painting by the artist Micon that hung in another building in the city centre, and the old men in *Lysistrata* refer to this painting when they are trying to understand what their own womenfolk are doing (671-9) in attempting to take over the city.

If *Lysistrata*'s initiative reminds the men within the play of the Lemnian women and the Amazons, *Lysistrata* herself feels that a stronger parallel should be drawn with the legendary wise woman, Melanippe, who knew many secrets about the gods that she divulged for the benefit of mankind. *Lysistrata* uses language, especially in the scene with the magistrate, that will certainly have reminded her audience of a popular tragedy written a few years previously by the tragedian Euripides about Melanippe. This female sage had delivered a famous speech in defence of women, and against the misogynist opinions that men held about them, and a part of the speech survives:

Men's criticism of women is worthless twanging of a bowstring and evil talk. Women are better than men, as I will show... Consider their role in religion, for that, in my opinion, comes first. We women play the most

important part, because women prophesy the will of Zeus in the oracles of Phoebus. And at the holy site of Dodona near the sacred oak, females convey the will of Zeus to inquirers from Greece. As for the sacred rituals for the Fates and the Nameless Ones, all these would not be holy if performed by men, but prosper in women's hands. In this way women have a rightful share in the service of the gods. Why is it, then, that women must have a bad reputation?

Lysistrata, like this famous character in a tragedy, argues that women are not evil, and we will see below that it is interesting that the major argument we know Euripides' Melanippe had used was that women are excellent at running cults and performing rituals.

Alcmena, Hypsipyle, an Amazon, or Melanippe the Wise – Lysistrata shares different features with all of these mythical women. She proposed a sex strike, is prepared to take over the city and administer it, and is a persuasive orator on behalf of women who stresses the serious responsibilities that they are capable of carrying out. But what about history? Were there female equivalents of these assertive wives, matriarchs, warriors, and wise women in reality? In Greek historical narratives generally, women are far less directly involved in war. The historical example of female passivity most often offered is the fate of the women of Melos after the Athenians besieged their citadel in 415 BC: their adult menfolk were all killed, and they were all sold into slavery along with their children (Thucydides 5.116). But there are a few signs that women, far from sitting

around waiting for events to develop, were indeed capable of intervention. Desperate times such as war breed desperate methods.

When the old men in *Lysistrata* liken the rebellious women to Amazons, they are also reminded of the real historical queen Artemisia, who had come from Asia with the Persian invasion of 480 BC, commanded a ship, and had made a great impression as a warlike female on the Greek mind. In a gripping example from closer to *Lysistrata*'s time, the historian Thucydides relates during the civil war in Corcyra (Corfu) in 427 BC, there was a battle in the streets when the women and slaves on the side of the democratic party joined in the actual fighting: 'the woman also entered the fray with great daring, hurling down tiles from the roof-tops and standing up to the din with a courage that went beyond what was natural to their sex' (3.74).

On another occasion in the early fourth century, according to a writer on war tactics called Aeneas, the citizens of the Black Sea city of Sinope were under siege; since they were so short of men, 'they disguised the most able-bodied of the women and armed them as much like men as they could, giving them in place of shields and helmets their jars and similar bronze kitchen utensils, and marched them around the wall where the enemy were most likely to see them' (ch. 40.4-5). Here women do not actually fight, but are regarded as a resource that can be used directly in warfare, dressed up as men and opposed to the same dangers.

It was not only in Corfu and the Black Sea that women were capable of brave participation in war. When Cleomenes the Spartan climbed the Athenian acropolis in order to seize it in 506 BC, he had not expected that a lone woman would stand up to him. Herodotus reports that when he tried to enter the temple of Athena, the priestess rose

from her chair to prevent him from entering, and declared ‘Spartan stranger, go back! Do not enter the holy place. No Dorian is permitted to go in!’ In the event Cleomenes did have to depart altogether just two days later.

The priesthood of Athena Polias – Athena in her role as protector of the city --was a very important public office, held for life, and the incumbent was traditionally supplied by one of the oldest and most respected families in Athens, the Eteoboutadai. The individual who held the office – who could not be a married woman -- was always and inevitably one of the most visible and influential women in Athens, but this particular priestess, at the time of the democratic revolution, seems to have been outstandingly brave and memorable. We have some information about another woman who held the office later. In one of the most fascinating discoveries of the mid-20th century, an inscription was discovered that allowed us to discover the identity of the woman who was priestess at the time that *Lysistrata* was first produced. The astonishing possibility emerged that *Lysistrata* was directly modelled on a real woman, the priestess of Athena in 411, whose name was Lysimache. She had a brother, who also held public office, whose name was Lysicles. According to a much later source, the Roman Pliny, this Lysimache held office for 64 years (*Natural History* 34.76)! *Lysistrata* means ‘the woman who disbands the army’, and Lysimache means something very similar, ‘the woman who puts a stop to the fighting’.

It seems almost impossible that the original audience of *Lysistrata* would not have made the connection between their most important priestess’s name and that of Aristophanes’ revolutionary new heroine. Indeed, *Lysistrata* herself seems to refer to the priestess when she is addressing the Magistrate: she says that since women desire men

and men desire women, then she and her female comrades will be successful in their aims and 'be known amongst the Greeks as *Lysimaches*, 'the women who put a stop to the fighting' (551-4). Ten years earlier, in his comedy *Peace* of 421 BC, the peace-loving hero Trygaeus had prayed to the on-stage statue of the goddess Eirene 'to resolve our fights and quarrels, so that we can name you Lysimache, the woman who pus a stop to the fighting' (991-2). Since Lysimache is said to have held office for so many decades, she could certainly have been in office both in 421 and 411 BC.

There are other strong parallels between Lysistrata, the heroine of the comedy, and the role of the priestess of Athena Polias at Athens. The priestess had a residence on the acropolis and could not be married: could this be why Lysistrata never seems to speak specifically of a husband, children or household of her own, and is far less sex-obsessed than the other women? The priestess of Athena had the duty of organising the preparation of sacred banquets: Lysistrata invites the Athenian and Spartan negotiators into a ritual meal to ratify their treaty (1181-7). Like the priestess of Athena who, nearly a century before, had stood up to the Spartan invaders, Lysistrata is totally fearless in the face of male violence: she is not afraid of the men attacking the barricaded acropolis (248-51), she wards off the thuggish Scythian sent to arrest her (431-6), and like Athena in a Homeric battle utters the battle-cry to bring the battalions of women out of the acropolis (456-65).

The priestess of Athena also had an unusual degree of public power: unlike other women, she could take men to court and be charged with offences herself. It is interesting, therefore, to find that Lysistrata is named out loud and in public, in front of and by men, without losing any dignity or respectability (1086-7, see also 1103, 1147):

citizen women would normally be ashamed to be named in public. Lysistrata is also an expert on weaving, as she shows in the extended metaphor by which she conceives of organising and administering the state as a process of textile production – the weaving of a cloak (667-86). Athena was herself of course the goddess of weaving in her role as Athena *Erganē*, ‘Athena of handicrafts’. But even more significantly, weaving was a central duty of the goddess’s high priestess. She trained the female teenage attendants who officiated in the cult, including the two specially selected high-born girls who were chosen to live on the acropolis for the nine months leading up to the Panathenaea (the great summer festival of Athena). These two girls, called the *arrēphoroi*, had to weave the new gown for the goddess’s statue, and to supervise eleven younger girls who helped them in this arduous task. It is significant that the chorus of *Lysistrata* remember fulfilling the role of *arrēphoros* in their younger days (638-41).

Lysistrata’s command of ritual is very impressive, as would befit the priestess of Athena Polias. She leads the discussion about the correct procedures for conducting the ‘sacrifice’ (183-97), performs the actual libation to the goddess Persuasion (203-4), leads the oath-taking (209-38), has access to and herself recites the bird oracle (770-6), and orchestrates and directs the hymn-singing at the end, including the Spartan’s hymn to ‘Spartan’ Athena (1273-8, 1295). It is also possible that the selection of the name of one of her chief accomplices, Myrrhine, is a reference to the name of one of the real Lysimache’s staff on the acropolis. An epitaph tells us that a woman named Myrrhine was a priestess of Athena Nike, ‘Victorious Athena’, whose little temple was added to the acropolis’ buildings under the Periclean building programme.

There are other references in the play to the cult and rituals of Athena Polias. The third woman who tries to escape from the acropolis has put a helmet under her costume in order to appear pregnant (749-55): this is the helmet associated in art with Athena. We also hear of the owls, Athena's birds, who live on the acropolis but keep the fourth escapee awake at night (760-1). Indeed, if Lysistrata shares many features with Lysimache, the priestess of Athena Polias, by the end of the play her persona seems to merge just as much with the actual goddess herself. In the fantastic version of Athens that we are watching, the heroine can virtually turn into her patron goddess. In a remarkable scene, it transpires that she (alone among the cast of this play) possesses the ability to summon into the theatre an entirely supernatural being, the personification of Reconciliation. By the time the two adversarial sides have agreed to be reconciled with one another, the chorus speaks of Lysistrata in such honorific terms that it is almost as if she has turned into Athena herself (1108-11).

We do not know whether Lysimache, the priestess of Athena, had actually taken it upon herself to complain on behalf of the women of Athens about the devastating losses that were being caused by the long drawn-out Peloponnesian War. It is not at all impossible that she had. The historical situation had become increasingly desperate for the Athenians, who had lost a vast number of their adult citizen males just two years previously on the battlefields and in the quarries of Sicily, as a result of the ill-judged and ill-fated expedition to that island. The losses were so great that there could hardly have been an Athenian family that was not directly affected by a bereavement. This sense certainly lies behind Lysistrata's explanation to the magistrate of the timing of her plot (523-6): we put up with it all for years, she says, but when the time came when we were

hearing people saying openly in the street, 'there is no man left in the whole country', we decided that we had to unite to save Greece. What exactly, she asks, were they supposed to wait for?

There also seems to be hints of what the real women of Athens may have been feeling and saying, at least in private, in her account of women's role in war and its impact upon them (587-93): 'We bear war's burden twice over: in the first place by giving birth to our sons and then by sending them out as hoplites...and then, at the age when we ought to be having fun and enjoying our prime, we have to sleep alone because of the campaigns. About our own position I do not speak, but I am deeply saddened by the number of spinsters growing old in their virginal bedrooms'.

Just how much did the women of Athens complain about their plight? The priestess of Athena would certainly have been a sensible advocate for them to approach. Scholars often point to the passage in Pericles' funeral oration, delivered in honour of the first Peloponnesian war dead in 431 BC, in which he tells the women who have lost men to bear up and not to make a fuss, since 'the greatest glory of a woman is to be mentioned as little as possible' (Thucydides 2.44-5). But why did Pericles feel the need to say this? Is he simply reminding the quiet and docile female population to remain quiet and docile? Or is he actually forced to mention the women because he is faced with a militant, distraught and noisy group of ritual mourners -- grandmothers, wives, sisters, daughters - - who are going to make life difficult for politicians advocating war? We just do not know. In 431 BC, the women of Athenians may still have kept their complaints behind closed doors, but the situation by two decades later was considerably more catastrophic.

When Aristophanes created his plots and his roles, he had an extraordinarily large repertoire of myth, history, visual art, real life, and theatrical precedent on which he could draw. His *Lysistrata* shares features with the sex-striking epic heroine Alcmena, the Lemnian Hypsipyle, the Queen of the Amazons depicted in Athenian art, and the Wise Melanippe in Euripides' famous lost tragedy. But she also displays numerous features that seem to have been suggested by the office of the high priestess of Athena, and even by the woman who held that office in 411 BC, the aristocratic Lysimache. By the end of the play, in a final twist, she seems almost to turn into Athena herself as she summons the divine personification of Reconciliation and declares that Greece shall put down its weapons. It is to Aristophanes' credit – and to that of the expert transvestite actor who may have inspired him to break the hitherto exclusively male mould of the comic hero in writing this brilliant role – that *Lysistrata*'s many faces fuse so well to create such a clearly drawn, heartwarming and memorable personality.