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Comic Pathways for Peace

Ritual Allegory and Choral Parabasis in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*

It is now a well-established view among scholars of Old Comedy that comic poets, with their critical commentary on recognisable persons and events of Athenian political life of the fifth century BCE, as well as their talent for filtering the contemporary state of affairs through paratragic episodes and amusingly distorted religious ceremonies, aimed not only at exciting the spontaneous laughter of the spectators, but also at educating and mentoring them.¹ This view is not without support from ancient documents. It is indicative of Attic drama's ever-recurring didactic strain that in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Aeschylus and Euripides momentarily set aside their antagonism and agree upon a single point: poets should 'make people better members of their communities' by offering useful and wise advice to the *polis* (1009–10).² The idea of poetry providing Athenian citizens with solid guidance was powerful enough to break down the walls of animosity between those foremost tragic poets, if only for a fleeting moment. Stimulated by a tendency of contemporary literary criticism to gauge the didactic and moral impact of dramatic performances on audiences, classical scholars have repeatedly attempted to delve deeper into the interesting matter of the educational and, more broadly, instructive function of Attic drama.³

Some critics have rightly argued that Attic theatre resembles the Athenian Assembly and the law-courts in terms of structure and content. The suspenseful viewing of ferocious 'wars of words' (*agōnes*) and the excitement of feelings of

1 I offer this chapter to my former supervisor and mentor at Oxford, Emeritus Professor Angus M. Bowie, as a token of my gratitude for his unfailing guidance and invaluable encouragement. I truly hope that the impact of his excellent work on Aristophanic comedy will shine through my discussion of the political and religious aspects of *Lysistrata*. On the didactic dimension of Old Comedy in general and the educational purpose of Aristophanic drama in particular, see principally Croiset 1909; Murray 1933; Hugill 1936; Gomme 1938; Reinhardt 1948, 285–310; Ehrenberg 1974; Newiger 1957; Whitman 1964; Dover 1972; de Ste Croix 1972, Appendix xxix; Kraus 1985; Heath 1987 and 1997; Russo 1994; MacDowell 1995; Cartledge 1999, especially 43–53; Zimmermann 2005; Robson 2009, especially 162–87; Sidwell 2009.

2 Transl. Sommerstein (throughout this chapter). On *euboulia* in *Lysistrata* see the chapter by Kopp in this volume.

3 See, for example, Gregory 1991; Croally 1994 and 2005.

crisis during those stage conflicts exemplify the democratic and legislative institutions of the Athenian *polis*.⁴ One could argue that in fifth-century Athens the theatre of Dionysus is very similar to Pnyx and Heliaina, given that these two fundamental institutions have as their central goal to deliberate concerning a broad range of important political, social, moral and religious issues. Similarly, the theatrical performances at the City Dionysia and the Lenaia, which are both supervised by official state bodies, culminate at the moment when select audiences are asked to reach a decision regarding the quality of the stage 'acts', by means of voting, after long days of watching and listening to talking heads debating an extensive array of contemporary questions and problems.

In Attic comedy the didactic agenda is more palpable and noticeable than in tragedy, where any contemporary themes are discretely shrouded by the thin veil of myth.⁵ It is fair to say that in both fifth-century tragedy and comedy political, social, moral and religious rhetoric tends to intensify exponentially in emotionally charged scenes, during which dramatic characters clash with each other, while the chorus frequently seeks to give useful counsel to the protagonists and the audience. It would be a gross misconception to argue that the markedly rhetorical tone of stage speeches and choral odes is simply a stylistic peculiarity of Attic theatre; on the contrary, rhetorical skill and figurative illustration lie at the heart of tragic and comic performances in the sense that, through its Panhellenic influence and mass-mediated communicational effect, Attic drama not only disseminates the democratic ideology throughout the Greek world, but also, and more importantly, exercises its own influential advisory share in the general conduct of affairs within Athens.⁶ In other words, the contemporary concerns of the classical *polis* are mapped onto the tragic and comic plays; the events on stage relate to the real lives of audience members and often raise unsettling questions about numerous facets and features of central policies, dominant axioms, and fundamental values of the Athenian empire.

⁴ Cf. mainly Hesk 2007a and Rosenbloom 2009 with further references.

⁵ On the ever-expanding debate over the political and social underpinnings of Greek tragedy, see e.g. Forrest 1975a; Conradie 1981; Goldhill 1986, especially 57–78, 1990 and 2000; Ober/Strauss 1990; Redfield 1990; Meier 1993; Goff 1995; Griffith 1995 and 1998; Pelling 1997; Cartledge 1997; Iakov 1998, 41–66 and 2004, 73–89; Griffin 1998 and 1999; Saïd 1998; Seaford 2000; Rhodes 2003; Carter 2004a and 2007; Debner 2005; Boedeker/Raaflaub 2005; Finglass 2005; Henderson 2007; Hesk 2007a; Wilson 2009; Markantonatos 2012a and 2012b.

⁶ See e.g. Markantonatos/Volonaki 2019 with extensive bibliography. On Attic rhetoric in general with occasional glances at related literary genres see, for instance, Vickers 1988; Kennedy 1994; Worthington 1994 and 2007; Tunis 1996; Lausberg 1998; Habinek 2004; Gunderson 2009.

As will become apparent in the following discussion, the subject of peace summoned forth from Aristophanes some of his most visceral comic poetry. In this chapter I shall argue that in *Lysistrata* both the entertainingly slanted rehearsal of the Adonia festival (387–98) and the chorus' parabasis-like double epirrhematic syzygy (614–705) are aimed at strengthening an agonised call for immediate and uninterrupted peace. The two scenes heighten the intensity of the comic action, which proceeds inescapably to the humiliation of male intransigence and violence, while at the same time paving the way to the final life-saving reconciliation and compromise.⁷ Both scenes traverse similar terrain. My purpose is to suggest that the humorous inversion of the rites of Adonis, with its many-layered meanings and symbolism, throws into sharp relief the men's sneering indifference to multiple threatening signs about the fiasco of the Sicilian expedition in particular, and about the utter brutality of the continued hostilities in general. More than that, the lyric-epirrhematic *amoibaion* of the divided chorus of men and women, which occupies the place typically reserved for a fully-fledged parabasis, demonstrates clearly the play's clarion call for amity and understanding between the relentlessly warring Athenian and Spartan alliances.

Further, in this extraordinary case of parabasis-like lyric dialogue between male and female semi-choruses, Aristophanes utilises the members of the chorus as a vehicle for expressing some political meditations of deeper moment, concerning great principles and eternal problems of the Athenian democracy. With their rhetorical dexterity and love of advocacy, and despite their fierce antagonism, the semi-choruses embrace a long series of essential democratic ideals and concerns. When the passions have risen to the highest pitch, this fascinating ἀντιχορία (the rare partition of the chorus into conflicting halves singing antagonistic syzygies) promotes celebrated *topoi* of the Athenian ideology and hammers home to the audience the disastrous consequences of warmongering and belligerence. Thus, both the amusingly warped Adonis rituals and the political combats between the semi-choruses not only set up arresting contrasts between the female and the male, but also invite the audience to contemplate the utter recklessness and mortal danger of ill-advised power-politics, and to consider the sorrow and degradation brought by war upon the innocent.

7 On Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* see e.g. MacDowell 1995, 229–50; Konstan 1995, 45–60; Russo 1994, 165–85; Revermann 2006, 236–60; Stuttard 2010 with further bibliographical guidance.

Adonia and peace

Often in Aristophanic comedy the various echoes of festive events and religious rituals are inextricably linked to central themes of the plays, enabling the spectators to interpret the story from another point of view.⁸ In *Lysistrata* the reference to the ritual celebration of Adonis aims at bringing home to the audience the sharp contrast between male vanity and female piety, while at the same time giving dramatic embodiment to the passionate struggle of female farsightedness with male thoughtlessness. This striking conflict that runs through the play provides an effective perspective for the horrors of war and defeat, the exhibition of misguided power-politics by the Athenians and the Spartans, and the thirst for blind revenge and absolute destruction.

After a humorous oath-taking scene, where the rebellious women of Greece decide to proceed with their sex-strike (181–253), and in the wake of a hilarious confrontation between the two semi-choruses (254–386), the Magistrate enters with an escort of Scythian archers. He has just been informed of the occupation of the Acropolis by the defiant womenfolk and angrily denounces the licentious life led by females. He condemns the shameless behaviour and wild chanting of female worshippers during religious festivals, citing as compelling proof of the women's insolence and incivility a recent event involving the Athenian demagogue Demostratus and a frenzied celebrant given over to Bacchic madness, probably his own spouse. It is noteworthy that the Magistrate is not only critical of the intoxicated woman, but also of the vehemently warmongering politician (387–98):

ἄρ' ἐξέλαμψε τῶν γυναικῶν ἡ τρυφή
 χῶ τυμπανισμός χοῖ πυκνοὶ Σαβάζιοι,
 ὃ τ' Ἀδωνιασμός οὗτος οὐπὶ τῶν τεγῶν,
 οὗ γ' ὡς ποτ' ὦν ἤκουον ἐν τῇ κκλησίᾳ; 390
 ἔλεγεν ὁ μὴ ὤρασι μὲν Δημόστρατος
 πλεῖν εἰς Σικελίαν, ἡ γυνὴ δ' ὀρχουμένη
 “αἰαῖ Ἀδωνιν” φησὶν, ὁ δὲ Δημόστρατος
 ἔλεγεν ὀπλίτας καταλέγειν Ζακυνθίων·
 ἡ δ' ὑποπεπωκυῖ ἡ γυνὴ πὶ τοῦ τέγουσ 395
 “κόπτεσθ' Ἀδωνιν” φησὶν· ὁ δ' ἐβιάζετο,
 ὁ θεοῖσιν ἐχθρὸς καὶ μιὰρὸς Χολοζύγης.
 τοιαῦτ' ἅπ' αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἀκολαστάσματα.

⁸ See primarily Bowie 1993; Lada-Richards 1999.

So it's flared up again – women's licentiousness and their drum-beating and their incessant cries of 'Sabazius', and those Adonis rites on the roofs. I heard them once when I was on the Assembly. Demostratus, curse him, was saying we should sail to Sicily, and this woman was dancing and she goes 'Alas for Adonis!' Then Demostratus said to enrol some hoplites from Zakynthos, and meanwhile she'd had a bit to drink, this woman on the roof, and she goes 'Bewail Adonis!' But he just bashed on regardless, that loathsome, god-detested Brain-sickite. That's the sort of unbridled excesses you get from them.

Paralleling Lysistrata's description in the prologue of the massive turnout of carousing women in orgiastic rituals for Dionysus, Pan, and the Genetyllides (1–5), the Magistrate's account includes references to the women's laments for the untimely death of the handsome Adonis. Probably, the sorrowful events alluded to are the typical climactic moments of a relatively controversial festival, the so-called Adonia.⁹ Indeed, the domestic celebration of the Adonia as well as the rituals in honour of Sabazius (the Phrygian nomadic horseman-god) are described here as marginal religious activities. For, on the one hand, during the Adonia men are at best only allowed to observe the ecstatic ritual from a distance, and this comes into direct conflict with their dominant social status and causes reasonable suspicion about the exact nature of the mourning rites; and on the other hand, during the Sabazius festival women take part in παννυχίδες – that is, mystic nocturnal celebrations which, too, may be deemed highly inappropriate by men.

Aristophanes exploits these male prejudices and promotes well-known female stereotypes in order to highlight further the subversive power of revelling women, while also placing heavy emphasis on the insecurity of male citizens. The alleged Eastern origin of those ecstatic rituals, which are meant to glorify foreign deities, also gives rise to male insecurity. It is widely acknowledged among scholars of Greek religion that such orgiastic gods as Adonis and (perhaps) Sabazius are *purposely* seen as having an Asiatic origin (by analogy with the non-Greek origin of Dionysus), which made the exotic aspects and strong hedonism of their cult worship more readily acceptable. As a matter of fact, there are good grounds to believe that Adonis, a supposedly 'dying' Eastern deity, probably had his origin in Greece and that he had a special relationship with Aphrodite and Persephone.¹⁰ At any rate, the worries raised by the foreign derivation of the festivals and the performance of frenetic celebrations by women without the supervision

⁹ Cf. principally Parker 1996, 198 and 2005, 283–9; Reitzammer 2016, especially 12–29 with further references.

¹⁰ See Henderson 1987 on 389; Parker 2005, 285–6.

of men are two traditional elements of those particular cults and do not in any way represent typical male anxieties.

Apart from the religious connotations which thicken the atmosphere of dismay, it is interesting to note that the contrast between the lamentations of the anonymous celebrant and Demostratus' loud-mouthed, violence-inciting exhortations brings the play into the political sphere of its contemporary setting.¹¹ First, the growing heat of the debate over male foolhardiness and impetuosity reflects the great importance of the topic for late fifth-century Athenian audiences. Second, there are direct references to known historical events, such as the expedition to Sicily and in particular the numerous Assembly meetings that took place in early 415 BCE regarding the declaration of war against Syracuse (391–2), and the constant appeals by some demagogues of the time for the immediate recruitment of the Zakynthians for an excessively ambitious expedition (394). Such references leave no doubt that at this point Aristophanes wants to juxtapose the female revellers' grief-infused frenzy with the unconcealed soldierly enthusiasm of the Athenian men.

Through this juxtaposition of deeply contrasting thoughts and sentiments, which brings together paroxysms of ritual delirium and combative impulses, Aristophanes keeps the spotlight of his criticism trained on his compatriots' ill-advised campaign in Sicily. The recklessness of the expedition becomes even more obvious and indefensible in view of the portents of imminent disaster. These gloomy forewarnings the Athenians chose to ignore at their own peril. Above all, with hindsight, Aristophanes berates his fellow-citizens for their imprudent decision to launch a large-scale military campaign in Sicily and for being misled by deceitful and dishonest politicians. The women's woeful shrieks over the untimely passing of Adonis come as a diverting but revealing response to the war-mongering speeches in the Athenian Assembly. Not only do these shrieks prefigure the looming tribulations, but they also lay much stress upon how futile the whole Sicilian episode came to be, despite the inflammatory promises to the contrary.

Aristophanes' bold stroke to put side by side heart-rending dirges with belligerent declarations in the form of a farcical rivalry clearly demonstrates what many Athenians realised after the obliteration of their troops in Sicily: the transgression of moral boundaries as a consequence of overbearing pride and greed. In concert with Aristophanes' stern condemnation of Athenian frivolity, and in the context of the Adonia festival, the triviality of earthly life, and in particular the fleetingness of youthful vigour and masculine beauty, are emphatically

¹¹ See Kopp in this volume, pp. 160–6.

marked through characteristic ritual acts. During the mournful rites in honour of Adonis, around late spring or early summer, grief-stricken women paid tribute to the prematurely lost, young lover of Aphrodite, decorating his wax effigies with floral wreaths in a manner of a real-life funeral procession. The celebrants also planted fast-growing and fast-withering plants such as fennel and lettuce or even fast-sprouting grains such as wheat and barley (the so called 'gardens of Adonis') in shallow pieces of broken pottery, baskets, or pots, as symbols of Adonis' early demise and more generally the transience and shortness of human life. The cultic weeping and howling of the female worshippers, which often climaxed in unrestrained groaning or even wild breast-beating and tearing of clothes, would have invited the spectators to recall the rivers of tears shed for the loss of Athenian youth in Sicily.

Seen from another perspective, the uproarious incident with the anonymous female carouser and the quarrelsome Demostratus (387–98) serves as a miniature portrayal of the whole play, in the sense that the women were the first to take heed of those ominous forebodings and attempted to forewarn the Athenian men of the coming Sicilian disaster, but their counsels did not fall on the receptive ears of honest and rational politicians. Similarly, in the aftermath of the catastrophe in Sicily, once more female insurgents revolt (in the play) against men's irrationality and cry out in alarm to deter the looming calamity. Now it is not a nameless female advocate who cautions about the impending misfortune by emitting shrill cries, but rather – in this extraordinary case of female empowerment – it is widely-recognised Greek women who come forward. These are women belonging to the two warring alliances, who are not in the habit of spreading unfounded rumours but reveal painful truths, unswervingly devoted to Greek peace and conciliation. In the women's agonised calls for truce and negotiation we recognise how relentless and undecisive was the struggle between the conflicting purposes of war and peace in the breasts of the deeply confused Athenian men. It is therefore above accident that the Magistrate casts aspersions upon Demostratus, an eminent democratic leader and influential orator who was most eager to declare war against the Syracusans and who continued for some years to enjoy the confidence of the people, despite the suffering inflicted upon Athens by that misguided expedition.¹²

To put it briefly, the comic reference to the Adonia festival in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, apart from highlighting contemporary political and social conflicts, reinforces the peaceful message of the play in the face of floods of warmongering rhetoric pouring in on the Athenian public. The controversial Adonis rituals re-

12 Cf. also Henderson 1987 on 394–7; Sommerstein 1990 on 397.

plicate in a strikingly amusing fashion Athens' excruciating attempt to survive the storm of war, though the signs are heavily ominous. There is, however, a light of hope in the midst of this darkness. As remarked above, the Adonia ceremonies are penetrated with the promise of mystical rebirth against the unchanging purpose of inscrutable divine powers; and this is not in some far-off, mysterious, transcendental sense (though there is an apparent strain of mysticism running through the life- and death-rituals), but in a sense which every true Athenian heart could acknowledge as a momentous lesson in humility and reason. Thus it is not too bold to argue that there is still hope that Athens, like another Adonis, is destined to die only to be resurrected in the years to come, more vigorous and powerful than ever before.¹³

Choral parabasis and peace

The development of the play prepares the Athenian audience to take the most stirring impression possible from the closing scene of Panhellenic peace and reconciliation after years of unabated rivalry between the Greeks. To this end, Aristophanes once more puts relief into his powerful message of truce and agreement in the double epirrhematic syzygy between the contending semi-choruses of old men and women (614–705). This time there is no religious allegory reflecting the deepest concerns about Athenian imperialism and highlighting the fact that there always lies a consciousness of terrible doom beneath the vain promises made by demagogues. Rather, there is here an extraordinary lyric-epirrhematic *amoibaion* of the divided chorus serving as another parabasis; nevertheless this ἀντιχορία is penetrated by thoughts and feelings which are *similar* between men and women; thoughts and feelings not only about Greek peace but also about the consciousness of an imminent disaster.

It is important to remark that, at first glance, this fierce choral feud between elderly men and women does not seem to allow the kind of public speaking that we find in the parabasis of other Aristophanic plays, i.e. extra-dramatic advisory speechmaking. Furthermore, the preceding 'war of words' between Lysistrata and the Magistrate is overfull of recommendations for the immediate establishment of peace and the rebuilding of a moral agenda that would define the future enterprises of the Athenian alliance (especially 567–86). In particular, Lysistrata puts forward her suggestions with such bold reasoning and metaphorical virtuosity that an

13 Cf. Markantonatos 2007, 167–93 with further references.

equivalent choral exhortation in the form of a full-scale parabasis would appear to be totally futile and lacking in dramatic power.¹⁴

In this section I shall argue that at this crucial point of the play Aristophanes, apart from showing the authority of putting an opponent in the wrong and defending one's own cause, employs a more evocative way to give advice to his fellow citizens and to consider Athens' fractured political landscape. Notwithstanding the clash of perspectives that removes the prospect of compromise at the end of this syzygy, the forceful rhetoric of the two conflicting semi-choruses highlights familiar political and social concerns. More than that, the unrelenting trading of blow for blow in this choral interplay of arguments invites the spectators to appreciate the complexity of political and social problems, and to approach the emerging questions with a critical mind, rather than with a herd mentality.

Arguably, this amusing verbal warfare between helpless aged men and undisciplined old women is nothing but the continuation of the *agōn* between Lysistrata and the Magistrate (476–613). Here Aristophanes broadens the scope of his criticism to disapprove strongly of his pro-war fellow citizens, following his censure of Athenian militant politicians in the earlier scene. But, as if by instinctive defiance and resistance, a compelling moral notion is set against this gloom of internecine bloodshed, making the silver lining of the cloud. Aristophanes wishes to emphasise that the arguments and counterarguments of the competing semi-choruses cannot in the least displace the time-honoured ideals of the Athenians.¹⁵ In particular, it is a hopeful sign for turmoil-stricken Athens that the people's unwavering commitment to the cardinal principles of democracy, which ensure the defence of the state and protect Panhellenic values and traditions, stands unshaken even in the face of relentless Hellas-wide war. The management of the contrast between the thoughtless instrumentality of men and the clear-sighted prevision of women – and more generally between war-crazy infatuation and democratic common sense – reveals the same axioms which form the very essence of Attic oratory (more specifically, the thematic core of funeral orations and advice-giving speeches). For the Attic art of declamation is distinguishable by those moving recollections of splendid Athenian triumphs and enthusiastic

¹⁴ See primarily Henderson 1987, 149; Sommerstein 1990 on 614–705. Cf. also MacDowell 1995, 239; Robson 2009, 10.

¹⁵ Kopp in this volume, who also analyses the *agōn*, argues that the play advocates 'the need to be open to opposing political views', p. 152.

praises of the democratic ideals, which morally rearm and emotionally support the addressees.¹⁶

The first strophe (614–35) of this quasi-parabasis in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* abounds in alert and ardent democratic patriotism. The old men, after removing their outer garments (a move which intensifies the feeling that there is a deviation from the dramatic illusion at this point exemplifying the directness of a proper parabasis) are quick to express their deep concern that Athenian oligarchic factions are scheming for the violent overthrow of democratic rule with the full support of the Lacedaemonians:

οὐκέτ' ἔργον ἐγκαθεύδειν ὅστις ἔστ' ἐλεύθερος.
 ἀλλ' ἐπαποδυνώμεθ', ἄνδρες, τουτῷ τῷ πράγματι. 615
 ἤδη γὰρ ὄζειν ταδί πλειόνων
 καὶ μειζόνων πραγμάτων μοι δοκεῖ,
 καὶ μάλιστα' ὄσφραίνομαι τῆς Ἰππίου τυραννίδος·
 καὶ πάνυ δέδοικα μὴ τῶν Λακῶνων τινὲς 620
 δεῦρο συνεληλυθότες ἄνδρες εἰς Κλεισθένους
 τὰς θεοῖς ἐχθρὰς γυναῖκας ἐξεπαίρουσιν δόλῳ
 καταλαβεῖν τὰ χρήμαθ' ἡμῶν τὸν τε μισθόν,
 ἔνθεν ἔζων ἐγώ. 625

δεῖνὰ γάρ τοι τάσδε γ' ἤδη τοὺς πολίτας νουθετεῖν,
 καὶ λαλεῖν γυναῖκας οὐσας ἀσπίδος χαλκῆς πέρι,
 καὶ διαλλάττειν πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἀνδράσιν Λακωνικοῖς,
 οἷσι πιστὸν οὐδὲν εἰ μὴ περ λύκῳ κεχρηνότε. 630
 ἀλλὰ ταῦθ' ὕφηναν ἡμῖν, ἄνδρες, ἐπὶ τυραννίδι.
 ἀλλ' ἐμοῦ μὲν οὐ τυραννεύσουσ', ἐπεὶ φυλάξομαι
 καὶ φορήσω τὸ ξίφος τὸ λοιπὸν ἐν μύρτου κλαδί,
 ἀγοράσω τ' ἐν τοῖς ὅπλοις ἐξῆς Ἀριστογείτονι,
 ὥδέ θ' ἐστήξω παρ' αὐτόν· αὐτὸ γάρ μοι γίγνεται
 τῆς θεοῖς ἐχθρὰς πατάξαι τῆσδε γραδὸς τὴν γνάθον. 635

MEN'S LEADER: No free man has any business now to be asleep; come, men, let's strip for this action!

MEN: For this already seems to me to smell of more and bigger things, and I catch a strong whiff of the dictatorship of Hippias. And I very much fear that some men from Laconia may have congregated here at Cleisthenes' house and be stirring up these god-detested women by underhand means to seize our money and the daily pay by which I lived!

MEN'S LEADER: It's disgraceful, I tell you, that these women should lecture the citizenry and talk, females that they are, about brazen shields, and on top of that try to make peace between us and men of Laconia who can no more be trusted than can a ravening wolf! No,

¹⁶ On funeral orations as powerful disseminators of Athenian democratic ideology see, for instance, Ziolkowski 1981; Loraux 1986; Thomas 1989; Mills 1997, 43–86.

men, this plot they have woven against up is to set up a dictatorship. But they shall never be dictators over *me*: henceforth I shall be on my guard and ‘carry my sword in a branch of myrtle’, and do my shopping in armour close beside Aristogeiton, and take my stand next to him, like this – and so be ideally placed to give this god-detested old woman a sock in the jaw!

Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* was probably performed at the beginning of February 411 BCE at the Lenaia festival,¹⁷ that is, before in June of the same year the oligarchic lobbies would attempt to undermine democratic government with the consent of more than a few prominent democrats. However, the aged Athenians of the play, angered by the unexpected uprising of the womenfolk, raise an alarm by mentioning the tyranny of Hippias, which was forever etched in the collective memory of the city as particularly abhorrent and brutal.¹⁸ More generally, the familiar story of the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton is a typical example of an indomitable democratic spirit, which the Athenian orators constantly extol in their addresses in order to encourage citizens to emulate those widely celebrated paragons of resistance and honour.

After all, invoking the danger of tyranny was a common practice in the fierce confrontations of that time between democratic leaders and oligarchic clubs, as well as in the relentless clashes between eminent democrats. More than this, the meteoric rise of the charismatic, but highly controversial Alcibiades in the political scene of Athens during the second part of the Peloponnesian War inspired fear among citizens that the establishment of either absolute monarchy or oligarchic government was a realistic prospect.¹⁹ After the total defeat of the Athenian navy in Sicily many Athenians came to be highly receptive to alarmist rhetoric and conspiracy theories bandied about by spiteful and unprincipled demagogues.²⁰

It is thus wholly appropriate that Aristophanes quotes almost unaltered the first line of a well-known drinking song (*skolion*) about the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton; the song most probably refers to the widespread practice of singers at symposia to hold a branch of myrtle while singing and then to pass it on to the next soloist to continue the banquet chanting (632: καὶ φορήσω

¹⁷ On the date of the play see Henderson 1987, xv–xvi; Sommerstein 1990, 1; Kopp in this volume, p. 160. For a different view see Tsakmakis 2012, who dates the play in 411 BCE at the Great Dionysia.

¹⁸ Cf. McGlew 1993; Morgan 2003; Lewis 2009.

¹⁹ On Alcibiades’ turmoil-stricken political career see e.g. Ellis 1989; de Romilly 1995; Gribble 1999; Vickers 2008.

²⁰ See MacDowell 1971 on 345, with further references.

τὸ ξίφος τὸ λοιπὸν ἐν μύρτου κλαδί = *PMG* 893 and 895: ἐν μύρτου κλαδί τὸ ξίφος φορήσω).²¹ Obviously, a period of political crisis calls for constant vigilance by democratic citizens, who must not in any way show complacency even at a time of festivity. Indeed, the myrtle leaves provide perfect cover for the daggers of the defenders of democratic rule because of their spear-like and sharp-edged form. The Commissioners are so alarmed at the unexpected turn of events after the occupation of the Acropolis by the recalcitrant women that they consider it necessary secretly to carry a weapon in the Athenian Agora, as once did the tyrannicides in 514 BCE during the Great Panathenaea; thus they can avoid what they feel as the clear and present danger of the overthrow of democratic governance. Furthermore, there are strong grounds to suggest that the myrtle is inseparably linked to soteriological rites,²² especially those directly or indirectly related to the shrine of Eleusis, an important military bastion of Attica of Panhellenic reputation because of the highly respected initiatory rites held there annually. Therefore, it is fair to say that in this case the murderous action of the tyrannicides comes to be purposely imbued with mystical spirit, offering a hopeful prospect of deliverance stemming from the violent death of a hated despot.

In the first antistrophe (636–57) the passionately exhortative address, which was previously hidden in the misty speculations of the elders, now gives way to the irresistible logic of the revolutionary women. They directly claim the right to provide their city with useful counsels. This particular emphasis on the need for good advice and helpful recommendations ties in with the opening section of this chapter, where much prominence was given to the positive impact poetry can have on Athenian citizens:

οὐκ ἄρ' εἰσιόντα σ' οἴκαδ' ἡ τεκοῦσα γνώσεται.
 ἀλλὰ θώμεσθ', ὦ φίλοι γρᾶες, ταδὶ πρῶτον χαμαί.
 ἡμεῖς γάρ, ὦ πάντες ἄστοι, λόγων
 κατάρχομεν τῇ πόλει χρησίων·
 εἰκότως, ἐπεὶ χλιδῶσαν ἀγλαῶς ἔθρεψέ με. 640
 ἐπτὰ μὲν ἔτη γεγώς' εὐθύς ἡρρηφόρουν·
 εἴτ' ἀλετρίς ἢ δεκέτις οὔσα τάρχηγέτι·
 καὶ χέουσα τὸν κροκωτὸν ἄρκτος ἢ Βραυρωνίοις· 645
 κάκανηφόρουν ποτ' οὔσα παῖς καλὴ 'χουσ'
 ἰσχάδων ὀρμαθόν.
 ἄρα προὔφειλω τι χρηστὸν τῇ πόλει παραινέσαι;

21 Cf. Henderson 1987 on 630–1; Sommerstein 1990 on 632.

22 Cf. Istros *FGrH* 334 fr. 29 on Eleusinian myrtle crowns. On the political significance of the Eleusinian Mysteries and how this is deployed in the context of Attic drama, see Markantonatos 2002, 197–220; 2007, 136–9; and 2012b.

εἰ δ' ἐγὼ γυνὴ πέφυκα, τοῦτο μὴ φθονεῖτέ μοι,
 ἦν ἀμείνω γ' εἰσενέγκω τῶν παρόντων πραγμάτων. 650
 τοῦράνουν γάρ μοι μέτεστι· καὶ γὰρ ἄνδρας εἰσφέρειω.
 τοῖς δὲ δυστήνοισι γέρουσιν οὐ μέτεσθ' ὑμῖν, ἐπεὶ
 τὸν ἔρانون τὸν γενόμενον παπῶον ἐκ τῶν Μηδικῶν
 ἔξαναλώσαντες οὐκ ἀντεισφέρετε τὰς εἰσφοράς,
 ἀλλ' ὕφ' ὑμῶν διαλυθῆναι προσέτι κινδυνεύομεν. 655
 ἄρα γρυκτόν ἐστιν ὑμῖν; εἰ δὲ λυπήσεις τί με,
 τῷδέ σ' ἀψήκτω πατάξω τῷ κοθόρνῳ τὴν γνάθον.

WOMEN'S LEADER: If you do, your mother won't know you when you come back home! Now, old girls, let us first leave these on the ground.

WOMEN: Here we begin, all you citizens, to deliver advice that will benefit the city; and rightly so, for she nurtured me in sumptuous splendor. As soon as I was seven years old, I was an Arrephoros; Then I was a Grinder; when I was ten, at the Brauronia, I shed my saffron gown as one of the Foundress's Bears; And I was also once a basket-bearer, a beautiful girl, wearing a string of dried figs.

WOMEN'S LEADER: So you see I owe it to the city to give her some good advice. And if I was born a woman, don't be indignant with me on that account if I make some suggestions that are better than the situation we've got. I have a stake in the common wealth: I contribute *men* to it. You wretched old men have *no* stake; you've squandered the fund that came to you from your grandfathers, from the war with the Medes, and now you don't pay your property-taxes in return – indeed we're positively in danger of liquidation thanks to you. Can you say a word to that? If you annoy me at all, I'll give you one in the jaw with this boot – and it's raw hide!

The didactic purpose of this double epirrhematic syzygy is evident. The aged women point out that the *polis* serves as nurturer and protector of the citizens, thereby implying that now in the hour of mortal danger the Athenians are duty-bound to join in solidarity with their motherland (638–9 and 648). This prudent admonition is not only aimed at the furious old men but also avidly given to the Athenian spectators themselves. Of course it is not to be denied that in the ardent warnings, especially those that urge the Athenians to listen carefully to useful advice, one can see the didactic flame in embryo, only to burst forth much later in the verbal contest between Aeschylus and Euripides in *Frogs*. The overwhelmingly agonistic environment of such oral confrontations favours the promotion of fundamental principles of Athenian democratic ideology; moreover, the unrelenting pursuit of the truly rare combination of expediency and morality through those fervent stage disputes is the quintessence of broad-based democratic government.²³

²³ On the highly agonistic nature of Athenian democracy, reflected in the annual dramatic contests, see Osborne 1993.

The aged insurrectionists enumerate briefly but proudly the ceremonial roles they were invited to play during their youth in order to gain the right to arbitrate in the present Hellas-wide crisis (640–7). This short reference is enough to create for the audience a sense of ritual regularity which reflects, *inter alia*, a corresponding political orderliness that is long past but remains within reach if the grace of unity and concord is duly secured. At this most critical stage of the play there is a series of telling allusions to the long term of service of the Arrephoroi on the Athenian Acropolis, the sacred duties of pious Grinders (ἀλετριδες), the processions and celebrations in honour of Artemis Brauronia (during which probably the young votaries officiated dressed in a special honey-coloured saffron gown, perhaps reminiscent of the hide of a bear, in order to ensure fertility and prosperity for the land) and the κωνηφορία of the basket-bearers at the Great Panathenaea festival. These striking references to time-honoured symbols of Athenian grandeur, such as the Acropolis and the rural sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron, which is closely linked to the Acropolis itself,²⁴ place strong emphasis on a network of monuments of particular political and religious importance to Athens.²⁵ The vivid account of the women's long record of illustrious religious service seeks to demonstrate that they have a sufficient share in the management of those purely Athenian emblems and traditions. In fact, the repeated hints at the broadly recognised purity and blessedness of the Great Panathenaea, at which carefully selected female basket-bearers attract public admiration during a spectacular procession in honour of Athena Polias, underscore the close relationship between religion and politics in fifth-century Athens.²⁶

The sacredness of these female roles stands in diametrical opposition to the superficiality and foolishness of Athenian men, especially those men who have so uncritically squandered the entire inheritance and unmatched legacy of the Persian Wars (652–5). The triumphs of the Athenians during the Persian Wars, and in particular their resounding victory at Marathon where the Athenian hoplites routed the vast Persian forces, are prominent *topoi* of Attic oratory, which is ever ready to praise the magnificent achievements of those indomitable *Marathonomachoi*.²⁷ And it is important to add that the concept of *providing* in lines 651–4 (εἰσφέρω, ἔρανον, ἀντεισφέρετε, εἰσφοράς) relates here to the great weight

²⁴ There is an urban sanctuary dedicated to Artemis Brauronia in the southeast of the Propylaea.

²⁵ See Paus. 1.23.7; Henderson 1987 on 645. Cf. also Papachatzis 1974, I.327–9.

²⁶ See principally the seminal contribution by Sourvinou-Inwood 1990.

²⁷ On the battle of Marathon see Markantonatos 2013 with exhaustive bibliography.

attached to the ideal of self-denial and, more broadly, self-willed sacrifice in war-time; especially, the latter offers undisputable evidence that the citizens are mindful of their country's blessings, which are bestowed lavishly upon the populace.

The closing strophes of this masterfully camouflaged parabasis highlight two other familiar motifs often promoted in the context of Attic epideictic oratory:

ταῦτ' οὖν οὐχ ὕβρις τὰ πράγματ' ἐστὶ πολλή;
 κάπιδώσειν μοι δοκεῖ τὸ χρῆμα μάλλον. 660
 ἀλλ' ἀμυντέον τὸ πρᾶγμ', ὅστις γ' ἐνόρχης ἔστ' ἀνὴρ.
 ἀλλὰ τὴν ἐξωμίδ' ἐκδυώμεθ', ὥς τὸν ἄνδρα δεῖ
 ἀνδρὸς ὄζειν εὐθύς, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐντεθριώσθαι πρέπει.
 ἀλλ' ἄγετε, λευκόποδες, οἵπερ ἐπὶ Λειψύδριον
 ἦλθομεν ὅτ' ἤμεν ἔτι, 665
 νῦν δεῖ νῦν ἀνηβῆσαι πάλιν κἀναπτερῶσαι
 πᾶν τὸ σῶμα κάποσείσασθαι τὸ γῆρας τόδε. 670
 εἰ γὰρ ἐνδώσει τις ἡμῶν ταῖσδε κἄν σμικρὰν λαβήν,
 οὐδὲν ἔλλειψουσιν αὐθις λιπαροὺς χειρουργίας,
 ἀλλὰ καὶ ναὺς τεκτανοῦνται, κάπιχειρήσουσ' ἔτι
 ναυμαχεῖν καὶ πλεῖν ἐφ' ἡμᾶς, ὥσπερ Ἀρτεμισία· 675
 ἦν δ' ἐφ' ἵππικὴν τράπωνται, διαγράφω τοὺς ἱππέας·
 ἵππικώτατον γὰρ ἐστὶ χρῆμα κᾶποχον γυνή,
 κοῦκ ἂν ἀπολίσθοι τρέχοντος· τὰς γ' Ἀμαζόνας σκόπει,
 ἃς Μίκων ἔγραψ' ἐφ' ἵππων μαχομένας τοῖς ἀνδράσιν.
 ἀλλὰ τούτων χρὴν ἀπασῶν εἰς τετρημένον ξύλον 680
 ἐγκαθαρμόσαι λαβόντας τουτονὶ τὸν αὐχένα.

MEN: Now are not these doings utterly outrageous? And I think they will grow to be even more so. This is something that must be resisted by every man with any balls!

MEN'S LEADER: Let us take off our tunics; a man ought to smell like a man right from the start, he shouldn't be swathed up like a rissole.

MEN: Now come on, you Whitefeet, we who went against Leipsydrion when we still were something, now, now we must become young again and revitalise our whole body and shake off this old skin of ours.

MEN'S LEADER: If any of us lots these women get even the least purchase on us, there's no work to which they'll fail to set their assiduous hands. They'll even build warships, and try as well to attack us with them and ram us, like Artemisia. And if they turn to horsemanship, you can forget about our cavalry; there's nothing so *equestrian* as a woman or so good a mounter, and even at a gallop she won't slip off. Look at the Amazons whom Micon painted, on horseback, fighting against men. What we ought to do with these women is grab 'em all by that neck of theirs and fit it through a hole in a wooden board!

Echoing their preceding references to the ever-present threat of tyranny, the Athenian elders look back at those dreadful events of 514 BCE at Leipsydrion, a well-known fortress of Attica situated either above Paeonia or above Mount

Parnes. After the killing of Hipparchus, banished Athenian nobles took refuge there under the leadership of the Alcmaeonidae but were made to flee this safe site, as they were eventually overwhelmed by the superior forces of tyrant Hippias (667–9).²⁸ In the rhetorically forceful double *amoibaion* the repeated allusions to the hateful tyranny of Hippias illustrate that, after all, the Athenian triumph in the Persian Wars and the victory at Marathon were not only powerful symbols of national pride and honour; they were also ready vehicles for the loftiest democratic thoughts, in that Hippias failed miserably in his effort to win the favour of the barbarian aggressors and reclaim his tyranny.²⁹

Further, the passing allusions to the naval battle of Salamis (675) and the Battle of the Amazons (678–9) reinforce the impression that the brusque protestations of the old men are but the necessary comic mantle enfolding unassailable values of the Athenian hegemony. Both the story of Artemisia, the Carian queen and ally of Xerxes whose bravery won her a place of honour in the battle of Salamis (Hdt. 7.99; 8.87–93), and the myth of the Amazons, who excelled in challenging King Theseus and his determined Athenian cavalry warriors, bring before the mental vision of the ancient audience fundamental aspects of the Athenian democratic ideology. These stories showcase the widely celebrated Athenian supremacy in the never-ending conflict with Persian invaders and, more broadly, barbarian assailants.³⁰

We are still at the mid-point of the play, and it is not surprising that the verbal quarrel between the old men and women leads to an absolute impasse; this at least is the implication of the last antistrophe (682–705), where the female revolutionaries attribute the continuing deadly war to the disastrous governmental initiatives taken by the incautious and unreasonable males:

εἰ νῆ τῷ θεῷ με ζωπυρήσεις, λύσω
τὴν ἐμαυτῆς ὕν ἐγὼ δὴ, καὶ ποιήσω
τῆμερον τοὺς δημότας βωστρεῖν σ' ἐγὼ πεκτούμενον. 685
ἀλλὰ χῆμεῖς, ὦ γυναῖκες, θᾶττον ἐκδύωμεθα,
ὥς ἂν ὄζωμεν γυναικῶν αὐτοδᾶξ ὠργισμένων.
νῦν πρὸς ἔμ' ἴτω τις, ἵνα μὴ ποτε φάγη σκόροδα,

28 See Sommerstein 1990 on 665. Apparently, at this stage of the play the elders refer to the hopeless passage of the Athenian aristocrats to the Leipsydion stronghold and not to the ensuing violent attack by the larger army of Hippias. It is worth pointing out that here the elderly defenders of radical democracy are so loath to dispel the haunting spectre of tyranny that they are ready to suppress their strong anti-oligarchic feelings to the point of identifying with the aristocrats.

29 Cf. Markantonatos 2013 *passim*.

30 Cf. Mills 1997, 30–2, 58–9; Tyrell 1984, especially 1–22.

μηδὲ κυάμους μέλανας.	690
ὥς εἰ καὶ μόνον κακῶς <μ'> ἔρεῖς, ὑπερχολῶ γάρ,	
αἰετὸν τίκτοντα κἀνθαρὸς σε μαιεύσομαι.	695
οὐ γὰρ ὡμῶν φροντίσαμε' ἄν, ἦν γέ μοι ζῆ Λαμπιτῶ	
ἢ τε Θηβαία φίλη παῖς εὐγενῆς Ἰσμηνία.	
οὐ γὰρ ἔσται δύναμις, οὐδ' ἦν ἐπτάκις σὺ ψηφίσῃ,	
ὅστις, ὦ δύστην', ἀπήχθου πᾶσι καὶ τοῖς γείτοσιν.	
ὥστε κάχθες θήκᾳτῃ ποιούσα παιγνίαν ἐγὼ	700
ταῖσι παισὶ τὴν ἐταῖραν ἐκάλεσ' ἐκ τῶν γειτόνων,	
παῖδα χρηστὴν κάγαπητὴν ἐκ Βοιωτῶν ἔγγελυν·	
οἱ δὲ πέμψειν οὐκ ἔφασκον διὰ τὰ σὰ ψηφίσματα.	
κοῦχί μὴ παύσησθε τῶν ψηφισμάτων τούτων, πρὶν ἂν	
τοῦ σκέλους ὑμᾶς λαβὼν τις ἐκτραχηλίσῃ φέρων.	705

WOMEN: By the Two Goddesses, if you kindle my flame, then *I* shall unleash the wild sow within me, and this day I'll shear your fleece so, you'll be screaming for help!

WOMEN'S LEADER: Women, let us also quickly undress, so that we may smell like women, women in a biting rage!

WOMEN: Now let anyone have a go at me, if he wants never again to eat garlic or black beans; because if you so much as say an insulting word to me, my anger boils so high I'll midwife you as the beetle did the breeding eagle! [31]

WOMEN'S LEADER: I'm not going to worry about you lot, while there lives my Lampito and my Theban friend the noble girl Ismenia; for you'll have no power, no, not if you pass your motions seven times over – hated as you've made yourself, you wretch, by everybody and especially our neighbours. Why, only yesterday, when I was having a party for the girls in honour of Hecate, I invited my chum from next door – a fine girl and one I was fond of, an eel from Boeotia; but they said they wouldn't let her come, because of *your* decrees. And you just will not stop making these decrees – not until someone takes you by the leg and hauls you off to have your neck broken!

It by no means follows that the essential gloom of the situation, worryingly intensified by the unreconciled voices of the contending semi-choruses, is never relieved and lightened with the promise of a brighter day. It should rather be said that the chorally disguised parabasis serves as an important prelude to future reconciliation and harmony. It was to be hoped that the spectators would never forget the multiple hints at certain cardinal rhetorical themes and ideas that lend particular validity and vibrancy to the poet's powerful messages of peace and truce. Thus, in the second antistrophe, the Athenian women are free to perform their religious duties while at the same time striking up a friendship with women from neighbouring cities, without worrying about any severe sanctions (696–702). In this antistrophe, where the dramatic power of the confrontation between

31 On that simile see Avdoulou in this volume.

old men and women reaches its chief height, the continuously ascending scale of comic interest in festive occasions foreshadows the closing scene of the play, the reconciliation of Athenian and Spartan men (1216–1321).³²

★

To sum up: both the religious allegory of the Adonia festival and the ferocious ἀντιχορία of the old men and women who contend with each other over highly important political and social issues, leave an ineffaceable impression on the spectators' hearts and are intended to educate and instruct. In both passages, the extraordinary female empowerment in the midst of all-out war adds a haunting poignancy, in comic terms, about imminent disasters. So powerful is the Aristophanic machinery for bringing together familiar religious motifs and rhetorical *topoi* of the Athenian democratic ideology. The play's heart-felt advocacy of reconciliation in the face of overhanging doom is so strong that it maintains the thrilling expectation of a brighter day of truce to those Athenian spectators who are able to take in the full significance of the recent past.

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³² Cf. Markantonatos 2011, especially 516–19; Anderson 2012; Lambert 2018.