Looking at Lysistrata

LOOKING AT LYSISTRATA

Eight essays and a new version of Aristophanes' provocative comedy

Edited by David Stuttard

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An Introduction to *Lysistrata*

David Stuttard

The eight essays contained in this collection look at different aspects of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, a play which has now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, become increasingly popular and increasingly misunderstood. Part of the reason for this popularity and misunderstanding is that readers, directors and audiences are readily seduced by the play's attractive packaging (the 'make love not war' theme), see it as surprisingly modern, and, as a result, too easily overlook the social and political context in which it was written. In this introduction, I shall briefly set *Lysistrata* in its historical context, as well as considering what Aristophanes' aims may have been when he wrote it.

Production context

Lysistrata was first performed in Athens in early 411 BC probably at the Lenaea, one of two annual Athenian religious festivals of drama sacred to the god Dionysus. Both festivals included tragedies and satyr plays (a sub-genre of comedy with plots set in the world of mythology), as well as comedies. Comedies were not just funny; they were intensely political in nature, often using the veil of humour to make serious comments about important issues of the day. As James Morwood reminds us in his contribution to this collection, Aristophanes himself commented in his *Acharnians* (performed in 425 BC), 'Comedy too [i.e. as well as tragedy] knows about justice' (line 500). Whatever the type of drama performed, in a political world com-

pletely dominated by men, the actors and choruses were exclusively male. It is possible that the audiences were, too.

Because it was held in the month roughly corresponding to our January, the Lenaea was purely for the local community – at that time of year the sea was too unpredictable to allow foreign visitors to attend. *Lysistrata* was therefore aimed exclusively at an Athenian (male?) audience, whose shared experience added to its sense of intimacy and immediacy.

Of course, preparations for the production had begun much earlier. The previous summer (412 BC), Aristophanes would have submitted his proposal for inclusion in the festival, part of which may have included the reading of passages from the script. For a comic writer, this must have presented its own challenges, because much of the humour of he play relied on up-to-the-minute jokes about topical events. So we must assume that it was accepted that the script was fluid and that additions might be made right up to the day of the performance. But it does mean that the overarching theme of *Lysistrata* – that the women of Greece vote to withhold sex from their men-folk until such times as they have concluded a peace settlement – had been decided some six months in advance of the first performance.

Historical context

The period leading up to the first performance of *Lysistrata* is one of the most complex in Athenian history. Events were moving rapidly and the situation was changing almost daily.

Athens was at war. Since 431 BC, along with the subject states which made up the Athenian empire, Athens had been waging what we now know as the Peloponnesian War against a confederacy of other Greek states led by Sparta. Because the Athenians held supremacy at sea and the Spartan Confederacy on land, the war had been inconclusive. Indeed, in 421 BC a treaty had been signed, which led to a nominal peace lasting some eight years, but which was in fact more like a cold war, with the sides becoming increasingly involved in proxy wars.

The most serious of all these involvements in proxy wars took place in Sicily, much of which had long been colonised by

Greeks. In 415 BC, a supremely confident Athens sent a large expeditionary force with the intention of defeating the island's richest city, Syracuse. But things quickly went wrong. One of the three generals, Alcibiades, was summoned back to Athens to stand trial on the capital charge of sacrilege. Instead, he escaped to Sparta, where he fed useful intelligence to the enemy. Another of the generals was killed, and the third, who had resisted the expedition from the start, mishandled it completely. A further task force was sent out, but things went from bad to worse. First the Athenian navy, then the army was annihilated. When the news reached Athens in September 413 BC it seemed to many as if defeat at the hands of the Spartans (with whom they were now again 'officially' at war) was inevitable.

But the Spartans failed to capitalise on Athens' misfortunes, and, with their backs to the wall, the Athenians worked frantically to build more warships and equip more men, making massive inroads into their reserve war fund (kept in reality, as in *Lysistrata*, on the Acropolis). At the same time, the Athenian democracy voted to appoint a new board of experienced magistrates, the *probouloi*, to help bring continuity to the war effort. One of these *probouloi* was the tragedian Sophocles. Another *proboulos*, this time a fictional one, appears in *Lysistrata* as the bungling Magistrate.

Meanwhile, Sparta captured the island of Euboea, just off the coast of Attica, and home to much of Athens' livestock; while some of the islands and cities in the Eastern Mediterranean and on the west coast of modern Turkey, which had long resented being subject to the Athenian empire, took the opportunity to try to gain their independence. Already, in July 412 BC, the Athenian navy had intercepted a Spartan fleet sailing to the island of Lesbos with the intention of helping it break away from the Athenian empire, and before long Alcibiades (now working for the Spartans) had succeeded in prising another important island, Chios, away from Athens.

Such, then, was the situation when Aristophanes was planning *Lysistrata* and submitting it for inclusion in the Lenaea festival: in the previous few years, a sizeable proportion of the Athenian male population had been killed in Sicily; as a result,

many women had been widowed and their households severely disrupted as their legal guardianship had been transferred to surviving male relatives; defeat for Athens had been a very real possibility; it had not come, but, although there was now cause for renewed optimism, the empire was in danger of unravelling; this could make the situation much worse, especially as supplies of money with which to fund the war were running dangerously low.

In the months between *Lysistrata* being accepted for the Lenaea and its performance there in January 411 BC, the kaleidoscope of fortunes and allegiances shifted dramatically and often. As Aristophanes' actors and choruses were learning their lines and choreography, news was pouring into Athens almost by the day: the crucial city of Miletus had revolted; Athenian domination over other cities in Ionia, Caria and the nearby islands was collapsing like a house of cards; Alcibiades was negotiating a treaty between the Spartans and the Persians; he had changed sides again and was now serving the Persian governor, Tissaphernes; and, despite the odd Athenian victory, in January 411 BC (perhaps too late for news to have reached Athens by the time of the Lenaea) the powerful island of Rhodes went over to the Spartans.

So, by the time *Lysistrata* was first performed, the situation was this: many of the poorer Athenian males were now manning the warships in the Eastern Mediterranean; Athens was haemorrhaging its 'allies' and subject states at an alarming rate; and Sparta seemed to be entering into an alliance with the Persians.

Political repercussions

With many of the poorer classes gone from Athens, and faced with an empire in potential meltdown, some of the wealthier, more 'aristocratic' citizens (the class to which Aristophanes himself belonged, though there is no reason to suspect his involvement) began plotting to overthrow the Athenian democracy, impose an oligarchy and make peace with Sparta.

A number of considerations motivated them. There were undoubtedly some who were innately hostile to the very idea of

the common people holding all the power; others saw how impossible it was in a war situation, when every major decision was taken by public vote, to keep secrets from the enemy; still others were concerned that, as Athenian finances were being bled dry, and as they themselves would increasingly have to foot the bill, they should have more say in the way the money would be spent; there was even an increasing number of people who thought that the only way to restore Athens' greatness was to come to terms with the exiled traitor Alcibiades, and the only way he would return would be if the democracy were overthrown. But one worry must have united them all: that the eastern superpower of Persia would become involved in the war on Sparta's side.

By June 411 BC, only five months after the first performance of *Lysistrata*, these oligarchs had created such a feeling of terror in Athens that they were, indeed, able to seize power and for a short time imposed the savage rule of 'The Four Hundred', a despotic regime which was soon superseded by the more lenient 'Five Thousand', which in turn gave way to a restored democracy. Under these oligarchic regimes, Alcibiades was indeed recalled, and peace was twice sought from the Spartans, who twice rejected the proposals.

Fantasy and reality: the 'message of *Lysistrata*'

How does this all fit in with *Lysistrata*? To find one answer, we must, I believe, turn to Plato's *Symposium,* written some time after 385 BC. In it, real characters from late fifth-century Athens discuss the nature of *eros* (loosely translated as 'love', but which more often than not means 'lust' or 'sexual attraction'). The setting is the victory party of the tragedian, Agathon, in 416 BC – five years before *Lysistrata* – and one of the characters is Aristophanes. In his fictional narrative, Plato gives Aristophanes an intriguing speech. Taking into account the fact that some of those who first read or heard the *Symposium* may have known Aristophanes, it is likely that it is true to the spirit of the sort of thing he might have been expected to say in such a context, and to the way in which he might have couched his arguments in parables.

Aristophanes' explanation of *eros* is this: in the beginning, the earth was populated by spherical creatures, rolling around with two heads, four arms and four legs. There were three sexes: male, female and hermaphrodite (beings which possessed both male and female attributes). But when they became too ambitious and tried to depose Zeus from power, Zeus first considered destroying them utterly. Then, when he realised that without these creatures the gods would have no one to offer sacrifices to them, he decided on an alternative plan. He separated each of the creatures into two, thus instantly halving their power and doubling the number of those who could potentially make sacrifice to the gods. Another result was that thereafter each person, aware that they were incomplete, would search for their 'other half' to make them feel whole again. *Eros* is, then, the yearning for this other half, and, depending on the gender of the original 'double' creature from which they were formed, humans might be gay, lesbian or straight.

Lysistrata, too, is on the face of it about mankind's impulse for sexual union, and about overcoming every barrier to achieve it. The women refuse their men-folk sex. The men become frustrated. Hostilities ensue. When the men can bear their abstinence no longer, they enter into negotiations. Harmony between the sexes is restored and, with it, sexual relations. But the fantasy is played out against the background of a real situation: the Peloponnesian War. In Aristophanes' equation, the restoration of sexual relations between men and women equals the restoration of peace between the warring states. Peace is preferable to fighting; make love not war. But I would argue that there is more to it than this, and that Aristophanes is, in fact, making a very serious and timely political point. He puts it into the mouth of Lysistrata herself, who, towards the end of the play has a speech, which appears in my version as:

> You all … share one country and one history, one family, all of you, all Greeks all worshipping as one, competing all as one in the Olympic Games, with all of your achievements, Delphi and Thermopylae, art, architecture, literature, this special, wonderful, so fragile glory that is Greece – our enemies are arming themselves even as we speak, and what do you do? Slaughter Greek men, sack Greek cities. (*corresponding to lines1128ff.*)

In this speech, as well as in the subsequent songs which celebrate how both Athens and Sparta managed to overcome difficulties in the past, but only with one another's help, we find ourselves straddling the real world of 411 BC and the speech which Plato ascribes to Aristophanes in his *Symposium*. Just as in the *Symposium*, the creatures, which were strong when they were whole, seek (now that they are divided) to regain that strength through physical union, so Athens, Sparta and the other Greek states were strong when they were united – strong enough to beat off the Persian invaders at the beginning of the fifth century BC. But now that they are divided (like the creatures in the *Symposium*), they are weak. And just as the gods prefer human creatures to be weak, so that they can dominate them, in the same way the Persians (the enemies to which Lysistrata refers) prefer Greece when *it* is weak, so *they* can dominate *it*.

In *Lysistrata* then, Aristophanes is making a very specific point to a very specific audience at a very specific time: if you allow *this* war to drag on, you will simply be weakening Greece and leaving us all open to an attack by the Persians. In fact, this was precisely the advice which the renegade Alcibiades, currently on the run from both Athens and Sparta had given (or was believed to have given) his new Persian master, Tissaphernes, the year before (412 BC). As Plutarch writes in his *Life of Alcibiades* (ch. 25) he

> advised them not to help [the Spartans] too readily, nor yet to destroy the Athenians, but instead through inadequate funding to cause both sides problems and slowly to wear them out, so that, when they had weakened and exhausted each other, they might become easy pickings for the Persian King.

United, Greece might stand. Divided, it would certainly fall. It was as much in the interests of the Persians to keep Athens and Sparta apart as it was in the interests of Zeus to separate the once-strong spherical creatures of the *Symposium*. In pointing this out, Aristophanes is, of course, not presenting any kind of road-map to peace. Instead, as contributors such as Alan Sommerstein show in this collection, he is simply expressing a

general truth, that Greece is better off united than divided. (Aristophanes' pan-Hellenic vision is discussed in this volume by James Robson and Lorna Hardwick.)

Perhaps Plato in his *Symposium* was actually reproducing the sort of arguments or parables, which he (or members of his circle) had heard the real Aristophanes voicing around the time that the *Symposium* was set. He might even be giving us a dim recollection of the meaning which Aristophanes or some of his audience placed on the scenario of *Lysistrata*. But, as we have seen, despite the seductive delights of an admittedly utopian reconciliation which Aristophanes held out to them in *Lysistrata*, the Athenians could not make peace with Sparta. The war dragged on, until, in 404 BC (seven years after *Lysistrata*), Athens was defeated by Sparta and her allies. Even this did not herald harmony in Greece, and states continued to squabble among themselves until they were so weakened that they fell easy prey to a foreign invader – not the Persians, but the Macedonians under Philip II (338 BC). They would never again enjoy the autonomy they had possessed in 411 BC. Aristophanes' prediction had, at last, come true.

Lysistrata for a modern audience

Despite being deeply rooted in its own time, *Lysistrata* has attained great popularity today, thanks in part to the belief that it is about women's emancipation, sex and an opposition to war. This has led to its being the most regularly staged of any of Aristophanes' comedies, a statistic which was greatly enhanced by its many performances worldwide in the anti-Iraq War 'Lysistrata Project' on 3 March 2003. (In this collection, the Lysistrata Project is discussed by both Lorna Hardwick and Martin Revermann.)

Partly because it is so difficult for any one translation to convey every aspect of the original, new English *Lysistrata*s are constantly appearing. Translating, adapting or writing any sort of version of the play can be a daunting task. Not only are there the obvious problems of tackling jokes which contained, for the fifth-century BC Athenian audience, up-to-the-minute topical references (often about people actually sitting in the audience),

there are the more general socio-political assumptions, many of them completely alien to us, which are at the core of much of the humour – not to mention the linguistic jokes and puns – while at a deeper level, the endemic racism and sexism, which Aristophanes' plays take for granted, is alienating to most enlightened modern readers.

The more academically accurate the translation of an Aristophanic comedy, the less true to the mood and thrust of the original it is likely to be. Equally, though, the looser the version, the further it might depart from Aristophanes' intention. In my own version, I have created a parallel world, the foundation of which is fifth-century Athens, but which is inhabited by characters with an experience of early twenty-first-century British history and *mores*. It is a world which is at first sight, perhaps, more suited to that of Aristophanes' more fantastical plays like *Birds* or *Frogs*. But in reality the world of *Lysistrata*, with its dominant women, its priapic men, its free travel between Sparta or Thebes and Athens, is no less of a fantasy world than the Cloud-Cuckoo-Land of *Birds*. It is an amalgam which, if we suspend our disbelief, somehow works. I hope the same holds true for the world of my version.

Comedy ages at an alarming speed, and topical jokes quickly become stale. Should anyone (subject to observation of performance rights) wish to stage the version contained in this volume, they are encouraged to make such alterations as necessary to the few references which I have included in it to characters or events of the early twenty-first century. Furthermore, should they wish to remove references and jokes which appear to them to be too Anglocentric and replace them with others more appropriate to their own setting, they are welcome to do this, too, if during the process they consult me. (This can be done through the publisher.)

The essays

This volume contains eight essays written by some of the leading authorities on *Lysistrata* today, addressing a diverse range of issues, from the structure of the play to the way in which it reflects fifth-century BC society, to its reception in modern pro-

ductions by contemporary audiences. The authors were allowed total freedom to choose what aspect of the play to write on, and, for the most part, each was unaware of what the others intended to say. For this reason, there is occasionally some overlap between one or two of the essays. To preserve the integrity of each piece, I have deliberately not removed such overlaps. Indeed, I believe that they are in themselves illuminating. For, read individually, each essay is stimulating and informative; taken together, they provide a compelling overview of scholarly thinking about the play at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

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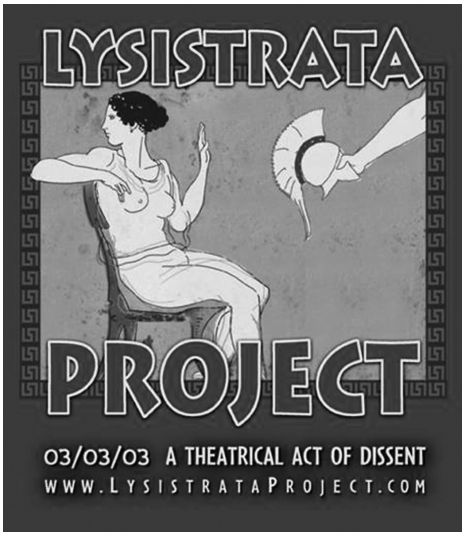
On Misunderstanding *Lysistrata*, Productively

Martin Revermann

(*The women, in a circle, place their right hands together.*)

Lampito	Keep it zipped till they flip!
Women	Keep it zipped till they flip!
Dipsas	Cross your legs or hope to die!
Women	Cross your legs or hope to die!
Myrrhine	Don't give them a piece of ass, until they give us a peace that lasts!
Women	Don't give them a piece of ass, until they give us a peace that lasts!
Calonice	Make love, not war!
Women	Make love, not war!



Ellen McLaughlin's adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, from which this brief sequence is taken, was part of a bigger scheme. The 'Lysistrata Project: A Theatrical Act of Dissent' [*see illustration*] figured as a means of global protest against the looming Iraq War. On 3 March 2003, days before the first bombs were dropped on Baghdad, the play was performed in 59 countries, usually as a reading (100,000 of them, according to the organisers), in front of an audience estimated to have exceeded 300,000. McLaughlin's script, in her own words 'a short and sweet version' (it lasted for about an hour), was put on as a reading in New York at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The phallic theme, indispensable for the play's comic effect and a main feature of its visual dimension, was introduced into the reading by means of a female clown who, before the performance, would sit in the audience pumping up large balloons of unmistakeable shape.

It was, of course, more than just 'a bunch of Ancient Greek dick jokes with some acrobatics thrown in to fill out the evening', as McLaughlin makes Cinesias say. Rarely, in fact, in its colourful reception history has the play been more blatantly politicised than on that Monday in 2003. McLaughlin's use of the motto 'Make love, not war!', deeply reminiscent to an Anglophone audience not just of the anti-Vietnam movement but of the hippie culture and sexual liberation movement of the 1960s in general, is an honest and revealing shorthand of what the play stands for to audiences world-wide in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: a proto-feminist play that advocates pacifism. In the pages which follow, I will discuss both these features against the context of the play's performance in Athens in 411 BC. As will emerge, both the proto-feminist and the pacifist readings of the play are demonstrably wrong. But this is not where classicists can, or should, stop. When contemporary audiences are reading something into the play which is either not there (feminism) or not quite there (pacifism), they evidently do so for a reason: they are projecting something onto the ancient play which helps, or perhaps enables them in the first place, to interact with it in ways that are meaningful to them. This kind of productive misreading, as I would like to call it, is neither a threat to historical purism nor a fashionable

aberration of taste. It would seem that it is a necessary part of making the ancient text 'ours', and as such commands the attention, and respect, of all of us who are, in various way, professionally interested in ancient culture.

A proto-feminist play?

If *Lysistrata* had been conceived, and perceived, as a feminist play in its fifth-century BC context, this would be highly exceptional. Much thought and time has been invested over the past forty years into improving our understanding of gender and gender relations not just in ancient Greece but in Western (and global) culture in general. As a result, the notion of women in antiquity as perpetually locked-up and entirely suppressed has been replaced with a considerably more nuanced one. In ancient Greece of all periods women played a vital part in religious life, occupying important priesthoods, celebrating key festivals (with or without men) and performing in specialised functions as worshippers of the gods (maiden choruses in honour of various deities, for instance, are well-attested for all of Greece – except Athens, curiously enough). Some women were highly educated (including some who belonged to the sub-elite, especially courtesans), and female artists could be well-known celebrities (like the poets Sappho and Corinna). In aristocratic households, they would often command considerable actual power, while they were indispensable bread-winners in smaller urban families or in the agriculture-based rural environment.

Yet it also remains true that women, throughout antiquity, were not treated as full human beings. They had no political voice, and were debarred from any official means of political participation. Like slaves, they were not legal subjects and could not own land. Against this reality, the representation of Lysistrata (and other women in both comedy and tragedy) stands out even more, because she is, precisely, so eminently *political*. Is Aristophanes the enlightened, progressive thinker who anticipates emancipation and the women's rights movement by more than two millennia? Surely not. One crucial thing to realise is that putting a woman into a position of political authority, control and power in a comedy is an important part

of the humour. It is *funny*, straightforwardly ridiculous, because it blatantly (and fantastically) defies the reality of the world of the audience.

This fundamental point applies regardless of whether or not there were women present in the fifth-century BC Athenian audience. The question is disputed and, on the evidence currently available, cannot be answered conclusively. All addresses by actors to the audience – and there are quite a few (even though they all occur in comedy and none in tragedy or satyr play) – are to men. But this need not mean that there were only men present. It may well be the case that only men are addressed because only men were thought to matter (they would, then, constitute the so-called notional audience which in this case would not be identical with the actual audience). In fact I believe that there is evidence to suggest that women *were* present in the fifth-century BC Athenian theatre (it comes not from drama but from Plato's *Gorgias* (502d2-8), a dialogue probably composed in the first quarter of the fourth century BC). If women were indeed present, it is fascinating to speculate how they would have responded to seeing a Lysistrata or Medea on stage. Would they have felt empowered, or estranged and alienated (as most men probably were)? One thing they certainly did not do: get organised to advocate social change and gender equality.

Funny and entertaining as the presence of fantastically empowered women on the comic stage may be in itself, there are other clear indications that there is no agenda whatsoever of proto-feminism in Aristophanes' play. One surely must be the fact that Lysistrata's empowerment is only temporary, and indeed aimed from the start at giving power *back* to the men once they have been brought to their senses and stopped the war. 'However, the conflict over, the danger passed, the new roles are generally relinquished even if the experience is there to draw on. The woman warrior, metaphorically speaking, shed her armour and put flowers in her hair.' This quote from the book *The Prospect Before Her* (p. 489) by Olwen Hufton, a leading historian of gender relations in the early modern period and taken from a very different context, is quite applicable to what is going on in *Lysistrata*. Once the Athenians and Spar-

tans have been reconciled through Lysistrata's forceful mediation, the status quo is restored, politically, socially and sexually. Lysistrata and her fellow-conspirators have served their purpose, and willingly acquiesce with the way things used to be.

In addition, the representation of women in comedy is not all that complimentary, another indicator that gender equality and female empowerment were not at all on Aristophanes' agenda (or on that of his audience). Aristophanic women are not models of virtue and chastity. They are scheming, vulgar and show a notable lack of self-control, a common misogynist charge in ancient Greece which expresses itself in an insatiable appetite for alcohol and sex (it forms the basis for the humour of the opening scene in *Lysistrata*).

This picture is, however, complicated by the fact that there is one single female figure in preserved comedy who is curiously exempt from most of these stock characteristics: Lysistrata! Although the play constantly activates genre-typical stereotypes, the protagonist herself is exceptionally intelligent and self-controlled, with little to suggest that she shares the faults which her fellow-conspirators show so abundantly (and entertainingly). This may make her a bit of a boring comic heroine: sober, entirely rational, non- or even asexual (a husband, who is of no overall relevance, is, however, mentioned at 513-20). The notion of a comic heroine who is in total control (not least of herself) and towers above that 'all-too-humanness' of women in comedy certainly facilitates bringing the big comic project to fruition and integrating the two sub-plots (sex-strike and occupation of the acropolis) into one.

In addition, some (myself included: see also in this volume Edith Hall, p. **00**, James Robson, p. **00** and Alan Sommerstein, p. **00**) have taken very seriously the possibility that the figure of Lysistrata is somewhat modelled on that of the priestess of Athena Polias ('protectress of the city'), Lysimache by name, who was holding office when the play was performed in Athens in 411 BC (at which festival is not entirely clear, probably the Lenaea which took place in January/February). Particularly in the final sequence of the play Lysistrata undoubtedly acquires a special, almost Athena-like status as the grand mediator on

the Acropolis (which is where the play is set, a very unusual choice in both comedy and tragedy). If the priestess Lysimache (whose name means 'dissolver of battle', something very similar to Lysistrata, 'dissolver of the army') indeed provided some kind of a model for Lysistrata, the above-mentioned peculiarities of this character would start to make even more sense. But whoever and whatever Lysistrata 'is', it is clear who and what she is not: a women's rights advocate.

A pacifist play?

As with proto-feminism, pacifism too would be highly exceptional if present. Fundamental opposition to war as a means of conflict resolution is not attested for antiquity at all. No known philosophical school, for instance, opposes war, even if some of them challenge other fundamentals of the human experience like the existence of the gods or the value of communal and political life. On the contrary, some philosophers appear to have given conflict a prominently productive role in their philosophies. Thus Heraclitus (c. 540-*c.* 480 BC) famously proclaimed that 'war (*polemos*) is the father of all things' (though what precisely is meant by this is not easy to see, not surprisingly with a philosopher who in antiquity bore the nickname 'the obscure one'). For Empedocles (born in the early fifth century) 'love' (*philia*) and 'strife' (*neikos*) are the forces that make up the cosmos. Hesiod, famously, distinguishes between good and bad 'conflict' (*eris*) (*Works and Days* 11-26). That there is no aversion to conflict does not come as a surprise in a society as competitive as the ancient Greek one. This is often called the 'agonal' nature (*agon* = competition) of ancient Greek society, a feature first recognised in modern times as being of central importance by the Swiss cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-97).

That said, war (defined as military conflict) is rarely glorified. The (sparsely) preserved poetry by the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus (seventh century) comes to mind. In his verses there can be no question about the elevation of fighting and death in battle (that this kind of poetry was, among other contexts, performed to – or by – soldiers as or shortly before they would

enter battle is a very plausible hypothesis). But a much more nuanced view of war clearly prevails.

In the *Iliad*, the foundational poem of Greek culture, war is a necessity, but an awful, disgusting and terrible one. The standard expression used is 'levelling war' (*omoiios polemos*): war leaves no winners and unites human beings in the ultimate realisation of their own mortality. In the final book of the *Iliad*, Priam, having ransomed from Achilles the body of his son Hector, sets out that during the agreed truce the Trojans will lament Hector for nine days, bury him and build a mound on days ten and eleven, 'but on the twelfth day we will fight, if it is indeed necessary (*ei per ananke*)' (*Iliad* 24.667). Given that the *Iliad* is a poem about war, it is remarkable that the poem is far from glorifying it (even if war remains an outstanding opportunity for humans to distinguish themselves).

Lysistrata, as mentioned earlier, means 'dissolver of the army', and the express purpose of her grand scheme is to make Spartans and Athenians stop fighting each other. But it is this particular conflict that she has in mind, not war itself. The distinction is explicitly made in her big speech of reconciliation towards the end of the play (1133f.): '… while enemies are at hand with their barbarian armies you destroy Greek men and cities'. It is war among Greeks, and not war itself, which she and her fellow-conspirators want to put an end to. 'Make love not the *Peloponnesian* War' is her message to the fifth-century audience. Is a twenty-first-century audience willing, and able, to listen to *that*?

On misunderstanding, or: are the contemporary readings of the play wrong?

There is a short answer to this one: yes. Against the backdrop of historical contextualisation, both the proto-feminist and the pacifist readings are wrong and easily falsifiable. But there is another, and much more fascinating, answer. It involves asking why exactly the play is almost invariably misread. Is it ignorance or negligent reading? This might sometimes be the case, especially since in common perception the ancient Greeks are often thought to have been the first to have come up with

something very important. The Athenians, for instance, are regularly presented as proto-democratic, as the inventors of democracy, even though it is deeply problematic to apply this term to a society which, while widening the scope of political participation and eligibility for public office, continued to deny these and many other rights to women and slaves (quite apart from the historical fact that Athens was not the first democratic system on Greek soil to begin with).

But there is, to be sure, something deeper going on. Lysistrata *is*, after all, a very powerful woman, and war *is* considered to be an evil (even if a necessary one). For a modern mind, it seems, the step towards projecting feminism and pacifism into the play is not only an extremely small but even a necessary one. The play *has* to be read along those lines – for only then does it matter to us. Contemporary recipients are profoundly conditioned, or one might even say 'hardwired', to view the play through such perceptual filters. In the wake of two World Wars and a chilling Cold War, and with the continued possibility of nuclear annihilation hovering above our heads, audiences in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century cannot but see Lysistrata's resistance to war among Greeks as opposition to war itself. And her distinct, courageous and charismatic voice is bound to be heard as that of an emancipated woman. This is nothing which competent and historically aware classicists could, or should, fight. After all, the play's modern reception forces classicists to ask very interesting questions about their own field of inquiry (what, for example, do we as classicists make of the fact that the female voice in Greek drama is so prominent and complex when it is being silenced in almost all other public discourses?). More importantly, however, classicists should be extremely pleased to see that a play created so long ago continues to speak to everyone in the present world – even if we cannot help listening to it in our own ways.

Further reading

The best translation of *Lysistrata* is the one by Stephen Halliwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). It is available as

paperback in the Oxford World's Classics series (together with *Birds*, *Assembly-Women* and *Wealth*). The volume also has very useful notes and features an excellent introduction. It is on a par, and should be used in conjunction with, Kenneth Dover's un-superseded monograph *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

The play in its performative context is discussed by Martin Revermann in *Comic Business: Theatricality, Dramatic Technique and Performance Contexts of Aristophanic Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 236-60. McLaughlin's version for the 'Lysistrata Project' in 2003 is available in Ellen McLaughlin, *The Greek Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2006).

On women in antiquity see the fine and richly illustrated volume by Elaine Fantham and Helene Foley (eds), *Women in the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). On women in Aristophanes there is Lauren Taaffe's *Aristophanes and Women* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) and Helene Foley's piece on gender in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy* (edited by Martin Revermann, forthcoming 2011). For how historical gender studies can be done, it is worth having a look at Olwen Hufton's magisterial *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe,* vol. 1:*1500-1800* (London: HarperCollins, 1995).

As regards the study of modern reception of Greek drama a superb study is Edith Hall's introduction to Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Amanda Wrigley (eds), *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1-46 (focusing on tragedy). The whole volume, a collection of more than a dozen of articles, is of very high quality. Cultural drivers for why and how we continue to connect to Greek drama are identified in Martin Revermann's article 'The Appeal of Dystopia: Latching onto Greek Drama in the 20th Century' (*Arion* 16, 2008, 97-117).

For locating information about individual performances the online-database of the *Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama* (http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk) is indispensable. On the Lysistrata Project, see M. Kotzamani's article, 'Artist

Citizens in the Age of the Web: The Lysistrata Project (2003-Present)' (*Theater* 36, 2006, 103-10).

On the modern reception of Aristophanes in general, see Gonda van Steen's contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy* (edited by Martin Revermann, forthcoming 2011).