

## **“Primitive” Satire: An Analysis of the Final Four Choral Songs of *Lysistrata***

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While choral songs from the Greek tragedians are repeatedly labored over by scholars trying to extract every small thematic detail from the often-cryptic songs, it is a wonder why some choruses from Greek comedy are treated with little of the same zeal. Perhaps the difference is due to perceptions towards comedy as being less “serious” than its counterpart, but regardless it is certainly shocking to read K. J. Dover completely dismiss the final choral songs of Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata* as being nothing more than a “primitive joke.”<sup>1</sup> In truth, his opinion is based on a surface reading of the four songs (1043-1057, 1058-1071, 1189-1202, and 1203-1215) which all employ different domestic images and language to convey the same message: “if anyone wants to borrow anything from me, let him come to my house at once - and he’ll get nothing.”<sup>2</sup> In all four songs, the Chorus sings directly to the audience, promising in the first song to lend money, in the second to invite the audience to a banquet, in the third to give away dresses and other belongings, and in the fourth to dole out grain and bread.

An analysis of the similar structures in other Aristophanic comedy and of the symbolism behind the choral language can reveal that the final choral songs, rather than merely propagate a now-trite joke, allow Aristophanes to accomplish two distinct tasks. First, perhaps unsurprisingly, Aristophanes utilizes the final words of the Chorus to provide a disguised, yet acerbic, critique of Athenian government, particularly its inability to hold its promises when faced with limited resources. On the other hand, the final four strophes employ language that recalls, in many ways, the domesticization of the Acropolis inherent in *Lysistrata*’s plans and illustrates how these will fail. In other words, Aristophanes, through the Chorus, attempts to make clear that he by no means endorses women, whether or not they were in the audience, to take up a sex strike; the plot was merely an illustrative satire and should not be carried out beyond the limits of this fantastical play.

For a character to jokingly invite members of the audience to dine with the characters appears two other times in extant Aristophanic comedy, and its survival even into the plays of Plautus suggests that it was a fairly common trope in Greek comedy. Thus the accusation by Dover on the joke's overplayed nature here in *Lysistrata* may appear fairly strong. Still, there are striking similarities shared between the joke's use elsewhere in ancient comedy compared to its appearance here in *Lysistrata*. In Aristophanes's *Women in the Assembly*, a maid servant arrives at the very end of the play to escort the final Athenian to dinner. She exhorts the man to hurry along as well as any well-minded spectators and any judges who look their way to follow too (καὶ τῶν θεατῶν εἴ τις εὖνους τυγχάνει, / καὶ τῶν κριτῶν εἰ μή τις ἐτέρωσε βλέπει, / ἴτω μεθ' ἡμῶν.; *Assemb.* 1141-1143). In response, the man agrees that she is to invite any and all, "for dinner has been prepared for each and every person, if they go home" (τὸ δεῖπνον αὐτοῖς ἐστ' ἐπεσκευασμένον / ἀπαξάπασιν, ἦν ἀπίωσιν οἴκαδε. *Assemb.* 1147-1148). Here, it seems as if the joke is meant as a pseudo-bribe, hinting that favoring this play will win the audience and judge a free meal, when of course this would not happen. It is this mock-bribe that survives into the plays of Plautus where in both his *Pseudolus* and his *Rudens* the characters conclude the play by going off for a drink or dinner and absentmindedly inviting spectators in exchange for applause, with the catch that they are still not invited to follow the characters right now, but perhaps later on. (*verum si voltis adplaudere... in crastinum vos vocabo*, Plaut. *Pseud.* 1333-1335; *si voletis plausum... dare,/ comissatum omnes venitote ad me ad annos sedecim*, Plaut. *Rud.* 1333-1334). The joke, of course, is that such a meeting will never happen.

Only the second of the four ending choral songs concerns a feast (1058-1071), and still the invitation in *Lysistrata* bears few of those similar mock-bribery elements. While the Chorus is still addressing the audience, here simply addressed as "men" (ἄνδρες, *Lys.* 1044), the Chorus never actually goes off and has a feast; the Chorus is merely discussing a hypothetical situation where they intend to host some guests (ἐστιῶν δὲ μέλλομεν ξένους, *Lys.* 1058). Little attention is giving to the nature of the audience as spectators as compared to the blatant

“θεατῶν” and “κριτῶν” found in the *Women in the Assembly*, and it is noteworthy that the Chorus does not even take part in the later feast that will take place between the Spartan and Athenian ambassadors. So while the choral song bears similarity to other mock-invitation jokes seen in ancient comedy, the function clearly differs from other standard models.

If one model for understanding these four choral songs failed, perhaps another model can lend better understanding. One of the notable aspects of these four songs is that they share the same thematic content and metrical unity, yet the first two songs are separated from the latter two by 119 lines. In these intervening lines, the play reaches its final resolution and the conflict of the play comes to an end: the Spartan and Athenian ambassadors agree to terms of peace. Henderson notes that Aristophanes used a similar separation of a choral songs in *The Birds*.<sup>3</sup> There too four, separated choral songs appear towards the end of the play, and they bookend the final part of the main narrative when the conflicts of the play are put to rest: in the end the main protagonist, Pisthetaerus, manages to get the gods to agree to his demands and those of the birds.

The four, separated choral songs in *The Birds* (1470-1481; 1482-1493; 1553-1564; 1694-1705), just like their counterparts in *Lysistrata*, are interrelated, but the topic at hand is not mock-invitations as it was in *Lysistrata*. Instead, the birds that make up *The Bird's* Chorus sing of the various far-reaching places of the world they have visited and the strange things they have seen there. According to Nan Dunbar, the songs are not as pastoral or Herodotean as they first appear, and a close reading reveals each individual song to be a satire of some part of Athenian life, whether it be a specific citizen like Peisandros (the subject of the song from *Birds* 1553-1564) or the Athenians' general fear of superstitions (the subject of the song from *Birds* 1482-1493).<sup>4</sup> The thrust of this Chorus, that no matter where they fly, the birds can only see the sins of Athens, directly undercuts the thrust of the main narrative. Pisthetaerus began this whole chain of events by wishing to escape Athens and its evils, and the bird-Chorus's suggestion at the very end of the play that Athens is everywhere highlights that Pisthetaerus's initial attitude was flawed. By showing this at the very moment when

the final conflicts are being resolved, Aristophanes highlights that the very logic of the play is not applicable to real life, and that this play is nothing but a fantasy, caught in the “realm of an ‘airy nothing.’”<sup>5</sup>

Overall, the four, separated choral songs from *The Birds* are used both to allow for further Aristophanic satire as well as a way to highlight the absurdity central to the play’s own logic. The job now is to assess whether the language of the final four choral songs in *Lysistrata* reflect the function that is suggested by the similarly structured passage in *The Birds*.

As for the satire, Henderson notes that these final four choral songs come at a point in the play when one might expect Aristophanes to begin satirizing and attacking individual audience members, like the attack on Pisthetaerus in *The Birds* 1555. Clearly, though, no such individual attack happens in these four songs. Therefore, Henderson takes the Chorus’s profession to not bear any ill-will toward anyone of the citizens (*Lys.* 1043-1045) as evidence of the Chorus’s sincere change of heart following the reunion of the men and women.<sup>6</sup> In this reading, the songs continue to be read as meaningless jokes meant to signify the joy of newfound reconciliation both of the Chorus and later of the Spartan and Athenian ambassadors.

When Henderson comments on the fourth choral song concerning the failed promise of grain, however, he notes that grain (σίτος, *Lys.* 1203) was often used by leaders of the city during the Peloponnesian War to curry the favor of needy citizens. Henderson notes that the failed delivery of grain mentioned here *might* be an allusion to how leaders often failed to keep this promise to the citizens, leaving people hungry.<sup>7</sup> Although Henderson hesitates to fully ascribe to his own suggestion, the notion that these songs might be acerbic allows readers to reread these formerly meaningless songs in a new light, one in which each song satirizes some aspect of the Athenian government. In this way, these songs continue to mount some sort of attack on Athenians as Henderson claims we should expect, but Aristophanes cleverly lets the Chorus keep their promise, “to not say one libellous thing concerning anyone of the citizens, oh men” (τῶν πολιτῶν οὐδέν’ ὄνδρες / φλαῦρον εἰπεῖν οὐδὲ ἐν *Lys.* 1044-1045). The Chorus will not be attack a

singular “οὐδέν’”, but rather all Athenian men (ᾧνδρες, *Lys.* 1044) who, by the definition of democracy, have a role in the government. While Henderson reads the sincerity of a changed heart in this promise, the Chorus’s profession to not say *one* libellous thing could also be a tongue-in-cheek way of ensuring that the Chorus says many libellous things.

As for what each song satirizes, Henderson provides a great start with the fourth song by recognizing the connection between leaders’ promises of grain and those who would need it. This is brought out in the song since the promised grain is not merely grain, but finely ground little chaffs of wheat (λεπτὰ πυρίδια, *Lys.* 1206) which Henderson notes to have been more expensive than everyday barley. So while the donors are seen to be have some wealth and power given their choice of wheat, the benefactors of their generosity are the day-laborers (τῶν πενήτων, *Lys.* 1208), the working poor, exactly the people who would need the daily doling-out of grain Henderson alludes to. Yet, there is a dangerous dog near the house of the donor, so no one actually gets the grain (*Lys.* 1212-1215), satirizing the inability of leaders to supply grain.

In the first ode, the target of satire is the mishandling of the state’s funds. Notably, the currency involved in the first choral song is silver (ἀργυρίδιον, *Lys.* 1049), which is precisely what Lampito singles out as a significant contributing factor to Athens’ persistence in war (οὐχ ἄς... **τῶργύριον** τῶβυσσον ἢ πὰρ τᾶ σιῶ, *Lys.* 173-174). Furthermore it is the silver that Lysistrata tells the Proboulos that she and the women will now be in charge of (τὸ γὰρ **ἀργύριον** τοῦτ’ οὐκέτι μὴ καθέλωσιν... ἡμεῖς ταμειύσομεν αὐτό, *Lys.* 492-493). This is not even the first time Aristophanes would be satirizing the mishandling of money in this play; the chorus of old women accuses the old men of squandering the money they had received from the Persian Wars (τὸν ἔρανον τὸν λεγόμενον παππῶν ἐκ τῶν Μηδικῶν / εἴτ’ ἀναλώσαντες, *Lys.* 654-655). It is clear that the play views men as being inept in the ways of managing money, and far too warlike, and this is reflected further in the first of the final choral songs when the chorus possibly satirizes the ability of the Athenian government to adequately manage their money. If one takes βαλλάντια in line 1053 to be a pun on the word βαλλάντιον

which can mean both “purse” and “spear,” then lines 1052-1053 can be translated as “so within there is [money] and we have purses” or “so within there is [money] and we have spears” (ὥς ἔσω 'στὶν / κᾶχομεν βαλλάντια). The latter translation would solidify further the connection seen already in the play between the mishandling of funds by the government because of their preoccupation with war, as exemplified by the spears.

The imagery of the second song’s feast (*Lys.* 1058-1071) looks forward to the feast that will occur after a peace has been struck between the Spartans and Athenians (*Lys.* 1184) and possibly indicates a satire on the state’s inability to attain peace in reality. Like the later feast, attendants are encouraged to clean themselves (λελουμένους at line 1064; ἀγνεύσετε at line 1182) and in both cases emphasis is drawn towards the door which will be closed off to outsiders (ἡ θύρα κεκλήσεται at line 1071; ἄνοιγε τὴν θύραν at line 1216). The difference is that in the choral song’s feast, some of those who are invited are also considered outsiders, i.e. the door is closed to them. To strengthen the link being forged between these two feasts, the guests of honor in the Chorus’s hypothetical feast are the Karystians (*Lys.* 1059), the very same people who are named right before the actual peace feast begins (*Lys.* 1181). By strengthening the mental association between the actual sympotic feast and the failed hypothetical one, Aristophanes forges a connection between the two. Thus the choral song’s inability to host a proper feast for all those invited implies that the state in reality has been unable to acquire peace and therefore unable to hold a proper accompanying peace feast. Beyond just the connections to the later sympotic feast, the food used in the Chorus’s feast further bring out the importance of this feast as being possibly peace related. The manner in which the pig (δελφάκιον, *Lys.* 1061) has been prepared, not merely roasted but burned through a sacrifice (τοῦτο τέθυχ’, *Lys.* 1062), suggests an importance to this particular feast that is not present at a regular feast. Furthermore, the pea soup (ἔτνος, *Lys.* 1061) is seen in *The Archarnians* during the celebration of the rural Dionysia by Dikaiopolis when he believes that he has just secured peace (ἴν’ ἔτνος καταχέω τοῦλατῆρος τουτουί, *Arch.* 246), and in *The Women of the Assembly*, pea soup is among the

many dinner items included for the main meal which signifies the beginning of the new rule under the women's plans (χύτρας ἔτνουσ ἔψουσιν αἱ νεώταται., *Assemb.* 845). It seems, at least in Aristophanic comedy, that feasts that involve pea soup are those of large banquets celebrating great events. That the choral song promises such a dinner and cannot provide it, seems to indicate a satire on the government's inability to bring about peace which would lead to such a feast.

The last song to be discussed is the third song (1189-1202) which links the leaders of the state as being no better than the tyrants of the past. The Chorus promises to give out various clothes, dresses, and ornaments to all children, especially whenever someone's daughters becomes one of the official basket-carriers for the state (ὅποταν τε θυγάτηρ τινὶ κανηφορῆ, *Lys.* 1193). The position of κανηφόρος, or Basket-Bearer, was previously discussed in *Lysistrata* by the chorus of women (*Lys.* 645), but the more important association to make here is the relationship between the κανηφόρος and the tyrant of old Athens, Hippias, and his brother Hipparchos. Henderson notes that it was a great honor and "evidence of irreproachable character" to be chosen a κανηφόρος, but a "great humiliation to be denied."<sup>8</sup> Thucydides relates that fears of tyrannical oppression abounded in Athens at around the time when Aristophanes was writing this play, and therefore explains the story of Hippias and his brother. When Hippias was ruling, Hipparchos, among other things withdrew invitation to be κανηφόρος to a young girl, which sparked anger within two conspirators that led to the murder of Hipparchos (*Thuc.* 6.54 ff.) The murder of Hipparchos led directly to Hippias's tyrannical oppression of the Athenians, and thus the association between denying someone κανηφόρος and tyranny seems to have been formed by this story. Aristophanes play with this connection twice in *Lysistrata*. First, when he first references κανηφόρος in line 645, the chorus of men compare themselves to the conspirators who killed Hipparchos just ten lines previous (*Lys.* 630-635), thereby implying that the women are tyrants. Aristophanes's recollection of the tyrant's murder and the subsequent mentioning of the κανηφόρος should not be seen as coincidental but a conscious effort to remind the audience of the

association between the two. The second time Aristophanes plays with this connection is during the choral song of interest (1189-1202). Just forty-one line before the united chorus will promise to give clothes to the new κανήφοροι (1194), Lysistrata tries to urge the Athenians and Spartans together by reminding the Athenians how the Spartans helped to overthrow the tyrant Hippias (οἱ Λάκωνες... ἀπώλεσαν, / πολλοὺς δ' ἑταίρους Ἴππῖου 1150-1153). With the image of Hippias and his tyranny fresh in the audience's head, the Chorus's failed promise to honor new κανήφοροι seems to be a direct allusion to the failure of Hipparchos. By extension, the choral song seems to be satirizing the leaders of the city as being nothing more than new tyrants.

It seems clear that, like the four separated songs of *The Birds*, the four, separated choral songs of *Lysistrata* can be viewed as veiled critiques of Athenian government leaders, but still more these four songs can also be shown to undercut the main narrative thrust of the play. Previous scholarship on *Lysistrata* has argued that much of the play, like Lysistrata's speech reducing statesmanship to weaving, is concerned with trying to domesticate public life. Even the Acropolis itself turns from a purely political entity to a more homely environment, one where joyous feasting will take place. In the end, the domestication of politics ends up succeeding, and peace is made between Athens and Sparta.

Just as individual episodes of *Lysistrata* are fantastical, like the attempt by one woman to escape the Acropolis by riding a bird (*Lys.* 723-725), Aristophanes intended his play to be fantastical not a blueprint to women on how to secure peace. Previous scholarship has argued that the final agreement of peace where Athenians and Spartans are so engrossed with a woman's body that they cannot think rationally is meant to highlight that Aristophanes did not think Lysistrata's plan a rational way out of war.

The four, separated choral songs which bookend the final agreement of peace also work to dispel any possible thoughts of generalizing Lysistrata's to the real world. While I have already argued for deeper, satiric meaning in these songs, surface meanings reveal a concern for the everyday, domestic life: money, feasting, clothes, and bread. Further still, they show

a failure in domestic life. Taken as a whole, these vignettes of failing domesticity indicate that the power of domestication is not as strong as Lysistrata's plan seems to suggest, but are just part of Aristophanes's comedic fantasy.

Details from two of the songs demonstrate the mistrust audiences are supposed to have regarding a real life Lysistrata plot. The second song (*Lys.* 1058-1071) has already been discussed as having fairly close parallels with the feast Lysistrata will host for the Athenians and Spartans (*Lys.* 1181). By presaging the coming Lysistrata feast with the failed feast of the Chorus, Aristophanes forces the reader to question, given similar circumstances, whether one can really believe that the feast Lysistrata hosts can be successful. If one domestic feast has failed, why should Lysistrata's domesticity be any more successful?

Finally, the last song, which warns visitors to not come to the house of grain because a dog is on guard, contains an acute warning concerning the entire Lysistrata plot. Three of the five times that dogs in *Lysistrata*, they are seen as negative creatures, who seem to exist only to bite eyes (*Lys.* 298), testicles (ἄλλη σου κύων τῶν ὄρχεων λάβηται, *Lys.* 363), or just a person in general (εὐλαβεῖσθαι τὴν κύνα, *Lys.* 1215). At line 363, dog, which here is feminine (ἄλλη... κύων), is used by chorus of women to identify themselves as bitch who want to attack the chorus of old men before any other bitch gets the chance. This self-identification by the women is important because it raises an important question concerning the bitch at line 1215 who sits before the door (τὴν θύραν, *Lys.* 1212). As Lysistrata leads the men into the Acropolis for the feast, whose door is also referred to as a θύραν just four lines later at 1216, it seems natural to assume that the Aristophanes wants the reader to associate Lysistrata with the bitch of whom the audience must be careful. By drawing this connection between Lysistrata and a dangerous dog at the precise moment when the narrative conflict has been completely resolved, Aristophanes causes the reader to reevaluate the play's protagonist. Similar to how the four songs of the Chorus in *The Birds* caused the audience to pause and question the very logic of the play, the choral songs which end the main narrative of *Lysistrata* has the reader call into the

question the very logic of the play, that the domestic powers of women could actually do good for Athens rather than produce a pack of bitches.

It is rare in poetry, and comedy *is* poetry, that something would exist just to exist, and further it is even more unlikely that a skilled poet, as many think Aristophanes to be, would write fifty-six lines of poetry that amounted to nothing more than one long, repetitive joke. Hopefully this study, managed to rectify any damage done to Aristophanes by critics like K. J. Dover who deny any artistry behind the final four choral songs in *Lysistrata*. Rather than a joke beyond a modern reader's comprehension, the final songs present a hidden critique of life under the Athenian government as well as an attempt to dispel the audience from believing Lysistrata's plan to be workable in any real sense. Although Aristophanes's comedies live in a world of fantasy, Aristophanes the poet lived in world of realism whose pains packed themselves thickly in his poetry, even in places one might not expect.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dover (1972). Page 154

<sup>2</sup> This summary also comes from Dover (1972) page 154.

<sup>3</sup> Henderson (1987) page 190

<sup>4</sup> A full analysis of these Choral songs is found in Dunbar's 1995 commentary on *The Birds*, page 688

<sup>5</sup> Halliwell (1998) uses this phrase to describe the Aristophanes's imagination in respect to *The Birds*

<sup>6</sup> Henderson (1987), page 190.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., page 207

<sup>8</sup> Henderson (1987) page 157.