

Denial of Physical Violence as Rhetoric in *Lysistrata*

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Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* depends heavily on the interactions between men and women. These opposing sides have several heated back-and-forth exchanges throughout the play in which they often resort to insulting and threatening the other side with claims of committing violence. However, these are for the most part empty threats which never come to fruition. This is not, however, due to actual violence being a foreign device in Old Comedy. On the contrary, Aristophanes includes violent acts in several of his works, including *The Birds*, *The Frogs*, and *The Clouds*. Nevertheless, throughout *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes repeatedly pits the men and women against each other with increasingly violent claims, yet never has them actually follow through with their own threats. He pairs this violent language with a blatant lack of physical violence in order to mirror the pairing of the women's teasing promises of sex and their refusal of it. With this, Aristophanes highlights the absurdity and impracticality of violence itself and in turn reinforces the importance of the women's efforts to end fighting.

A significant aspect to note concerning violence in *Lysistrata* is that it is an act which is largely expected of men. In the beginning of the play, as Lysistrata is attempting to convince the other wives to abstain from sex, one of the first concerns that Calonice raises is the fear that their husbands will try to force them (the wives) to have sex by dragging or beating them (ἐὰν λαβόντες δ' ἐς τὸ δομάτιον βίᾳ ἔλκωσιν ἡμᾶς...ἐὰν δὲ τύπτωσιν, 160-3). This shows that the women assume violence from men, and especially from those who are their husbands. Lysistrata's advice in this matter is to "hold onto the door" (ἀντέχου σὺ τῶν θυρῶν, 161), or simply "bear the evils badly" (παρέχειν χρῆ κακὰ κακῶς, 163), rather than fight back. With this short exchange, Aristophanes sets up for the audience the understanding that men are naturally violent, whereas the women, under Lysistrata's command, are advocates of responding nonviolently. This, of course, fits in with the larger issue at hand of the women wanting the men to end the war.

Thus, straightway Aristophanes illustrates men as being violent towards women in his play as they do violence to men in the world outside his play. These associated characteristics continue to manifest throughout the remainder of the play.

The very first appearance of men in *Lysistrata* shows precisely this violent nature to which Calonice and the other women alluded. As the group of old men carry their logs and buckets of fire up to the Acropolis, their leader speaks of their plan to either batter down the door or burn it and smoke out all the women inside (308-11). Thus, the men characterize themselves as willingly violent toward women. Throughout the men's ascent towards the Acropolis, they lament the harshness of the smoke billowing out of their buckets, claiming that the smoke "bites their eyes just like a raving bitch" (ὥσπερ κύων λυττῶσα τῶφθαλμῷ δάκνει, 298). The fact that they intend to use this same smoke to harm the women displays their cruel and violent intentions. However, as is a recurring theme in the play, the men will never actually have the chance to enact their violent plan. Moreover, it is also crucial to note the use of the feminine *λυττῶσα* in this description of the dog. Even in the men's attempt at enacting violence, they are still thwarted by a feminine force. This theme of women overpowering men also persists throughout the play.

Once the male chorus at last approaches the female chorus, the insults commence and escalate rapidly. The women's chorus refers to the men as "entirely wicked" (πονωπονηροί, 350) in the very first line of their address to them. However, the first side to make an explicitly violent claim is the men. In response to the women "prattling on" (λαλεῖν, 356), the men question whether it is "necessary for [the men], beating [the women], to break their wood across them" (οὐ περικατᾶξαι τὸ χύλον τύπτοντ' ἐχρῆν τιν' αὐταῖς, 357). From here, both sides proceed to hurl violent threats at one another, with each claim being more ridiculous than the previous. As the exchange continues, the responses from both sides become shorter, quicker, and harsher. This builds the tension, as the audience anticipates when the two sides will resort to blows, as they so boldly claim they will.

However, it is significant to note that the women's violent threats are entirely conditional. That is, each of the injuries they boast they will inflict on the men is contingent on the men harming them first. The men also phrase their threats in the forms of conditionals, but theirs do not depend on the women attacking them first. This can be seen especially clearly in lines 360-367, in which the men voice the possible cruelties they will perform, while the women counter with what their retaliation will be if the men follow through with these claims:

ΧΟΡΟΣ ΓΕΡΟΝΤΩΝ. εἰ νῆ Δί' ἤδη τὰς γνάθους
τούτων τις ἢ δις ἢ τρίς ἔκομεν ὥσπερ Βουπάλου, φωνήν
ἂν οὐκ ἂν εἶχον.

ΧΟΡΟΣ ΓΥΝΑΙΚΩΝ. καὶ μὴν ἰδοὺ παταξάτω τις;
σταῖσ' ἐγὼ παρέξω, κοῦ μή ποτ' ἄλλη σου κύων τῶν
ὄρχεων λάβηται.

X GE. εἰ μὴ σιωπήσει, θενῶν σου 'κκοκκιῶ τὸ γῆρας.

X GY. ἄψαι μόνον Στρατυλλίδος τῶ δακτύλῳ
προσελθῶν.

X GE. τί δ' ἦν σποδῶ τοῖς κονδύλοις; τί μ' ἐργάσει
τὸ δεινόν;

X GY. βρύκουσά σου τοὺς πλεύμονας καὶ τᾶντερ'
ἐξαμήσω. (360-367)

CHORUS OF OLD MEN. If, by Zeus, someone had already struck their jaws two or three times, just like Boupalos' jaw, they wouldn't have the ability to speak.

CHORUS OF WOMEN. All right, then, let someone come strike me! I'll stand here and provide my jaw, and never again will another bitch grab your testicles.

MEN. If you don't shut up, I'm going to beat you and pluck out your old age.

WOMEN. Just come forward and lay a *finger* on Stratyllis.

MEN. And what if I pound you with my knuckles? What terrible thing could you do to me then?

WOMEN. I'd bite your lungs and tear out your guts.

Here, instead of the men saying that they will attack only if the women should be the first to strike, they claim that if the women so much as continue talking, they will begin to attack them. Further, the men provoke the women's violent language by asking them leading questions about what they would intend to do if the men harm them. In this way, the men are the instigators of the violent language, while the women respond only with conditionally violent claims. Additionally, when they do use conditional language, the men's justification for wanting to harm the women is not based on self-defense. With this first interaction between the men and women, Aristophanes further characterizes the men as being senselessly violent-minded.

This heated section ends with the men threatening to burn the women, upon which the women dump their pots of water on them (372-381). After nearly thirty lines of the two sides warning each other that they will commit such absurd and gruesome obscenities as biting the other's lungs and tearing out their guts (367), this outcome is decidedly anticlimactic. Water, while a surprise to the men, is by no means damaging or painful. However, this result coincides with the established characteristics of both sides. The men brandish fire, a destructive weapon, and make lofty claims of how they plan to attack the women. The women, meanwhile, possess water, which they use to disarm rather than harm the enraged men. In this way, the women and their props function as the pacifiers of the conflict, just as they are meant to in the larger story.

Further, it is significant to note that the men are technically the only side not to maintain their promises. Two separate times in this section, the men say that they will hurt the women if they do not stop talking. Obviously, the dialogue does continue, and the women are far from silent. However, despite

this, the men do not actually bring their hands against the women. In doing this, they break their promise. The women, on the other hand, stick to their stated plans. They maintain that they will resort to physical brutality if the men harm them first. Because the men do not follow through, neither do the women. Here, Aristophanes further presents the men in a negative light. As this scene shows, the men boast extreme actions, but are incapable of staying true to the rules and stipulations they set for themselves. Similarly, women are shown to do just as they say they will.

This is not the only instance of violent language in *Lysistrata*, however. Shortly after this scene, Lysistrata at last emerges from the Acropolis. There then follows another heated stichomythia, this time between the commissioner with his archers and Lysistrata. Once again, it is the men who initiate the violent language. The commissioner commands the archers to seize the women and bind their hands (ξυλλάμβαν' αὐτήν κώπισω τῷ χειρὲ δεῖ, 434). Similarly to the previous exchange, this command is not a reaction to Lysistrata committing or even threatening to commit an act of violence. The commissioner's demand to have her, as well as the other women, bound is due to Lysistrata's boldness to say that the men should use "intelligence and common sense" rather than crowbars for prying open the doors to get to the women (οὐ γὰρ μοχλῶν δεῖ μάλλον ἢ νοῦ καὶ φρενῶν, 431). After the commissioner has commenced the violent language, Lysistrata and her female attendants then join in. However, just as with the last exchange, every violent threat the women use is conditional, depending on the men coming towards them or inflicting harm first:

ΛΥΣΙΣΤΡΑΤΗ. εἴ τάρᾳ νῆ τὴν Ἄρτεμιν τὴν χειρὰ μοι ἄκραν προσοίσει δημόσιος ὢν, κλαύσεται.

ΠΡΟΒΟΥΛΟΣ. ἔδεισας οὗτος; οὐ ξυναρπάσει μέσην καὶ σὺ μετὰ τούτου κἀνύσαντε δῆσεται;

ΓΥΝΗ Α. εἴ τάρᾳ νῆ τὴν Πάνδροσον ταύτη μόνον τὴν χεῖρ' ἐπιβαλεῖς, ἐπιχεσεῖ πατούμενος.

ΠΡ. ἰδοῦ γ' ἐπιχεσεῖ. ποῦ 'στιν ἕτερος τοξότης;

ταύτην προτέραν ζύνδησον, ότιη και λαλει.

ΓΥΝΗ Β. εϊ τάρα νη την Φωσφόρον την χειρ' άκραν
ταύτη προσοίσεις, κύαθον αιτήσεις τάχα.

ΠΡ. τουτι τί ην; ποϋ τοξότης; ταύτης εχου.
παύσω τιν' ύμων τησδ' εγω της εξόδου.

ΓΥΝΗ Γ. εϊ τάρα νη την Ταυροπόλον ταύτη πρόσει,
έκκοκκιω σου τας στενοκωκύτους τρίχας.

ΠΡ. οϊμοι κακοδαίμων: έπiléλοιφ' ό τοξότης.
άταρ ου γυναικων ουδέποτ' εσθ' ήττητέα
ήμιν: όμόσε χωρωμεν αυταις ω Σκύθαι
ζυνταξάμενοι.

ΛΥ. νη τω θεω γνώσεσθ' άρα
ότι και παρ' ήμιν εισι τέτταρες λόχοι
μαχίμων γυναικων ένδον έξωπλισμένων.

ΠΡ. άποστρέφετε τας χειρας αυτων ω Σκύθαι. (435-
455)

LYSISTRATA. If, by Artemis, that public slave even
lays a finger on me, he'll be crying.

COMMISSIONER. You there, are you afraid? Grab
her by the middle, and *you*, bind her and get it done!

WOMAN A. If, by Pandrosos, you only even lay your
hand on her, I'll stomp the shit out of you.

COMMISSIONER. Oh, get a load this, "you'll shit!"
Where's the other archer? Bind her first since she keeps
blabbering.

WOMAN B. If, by Phosphorus, you even bring a finger
against her, you'll be begging for a cup soon.

COMMISSIONER. What's this? Where's the archer!
Hold her! I'll stop one of you from coming out.

WOMAN C. If, by Artemis Tauropolos, you even
approach her, I'll pull out your squealing hairs.

COMMISSIONER. Oh, what a miserable fate. My
archer has failed me! But we must never be beaten by
women. Scythians, let's get in order and advance toward
them together!

LYSISTRATA. Well, by the gods, you'll learn that on
our side there are four troops of warlike women armed
and ready in there.

COMMISSIONER. Scythians! Twist back their hands!

With this second, even more bitter exchange, the women further make clear that beginning the violence is the role of men, not women. Except for Lysistrata's last comment, each woman's reply begins with "εἴ τάρρα νῆ τὴν [deity]." This repeated formula strengthens the association of women with conditional threats. The commissioner, meanwhile, commands the archers to bind Lysistrata and the others simply for talking. This is reminiscent of the earlier confrontation scene in lines 360-367.

However, this scene between the women and the commissioner is not entirely and explicitly devoid of physical violence. After the archers come forward to bind some of the women, Lysistrata calls upon her band of women to come out and overpower the men. She encourages them to "drag, smash, strike, rebuke, and be shameless" (οὐχ ἔλξετ', οὐ παίησετ', οὐκ ἀράξετε; | οὐ λοιδορήσετ', οὐκ ἀναισχυντήσετε;, 459-60). Though this harshness seems uncharacteristic of the women, it does not contradict the threats they have been making throughout the play. The archers, having been summoned by the commissioner, have presumably approached the women. This is one of the conditions under which the women said they would react violently (εἴ τάρρα νῆ τὴν Ταυροπόλον ταύτη πρόσσει..., 447). Moreover, in the line immediately following her command,

with no indication given of how much (if any) damage the archers suffered, Lysistrata calls off the women and tells them they should “withdraw and not despoil [the men]” (παύσασθ’, ἐπιναχωρεῖτε, μὴ σκυλεύετε, 461).

This is the only scene which possibly violates the theme of nonviolence in the whole play. However, it remains unclear what specifically the women do. Translators and commentators alike give vague suggestions for what might have happened on stage at this point. In Stephen Halliwell’s translation, the stage directions he provides here as the women route the men is “Various women appear and repulse the half-hearted attack of the archers” (Halliwell 111). In J. Hilton Turner’s commentary, he simply says that the archers are “driven out of sight” (Turner 67). Moreover, in his commentary on this scene, Jeffrey Henderson notes that “the occupying women defend themselves just as had the chorus of old women” (Henderson 123). Thus the physical opposition of the women is portrayed as neither unwarranted nor unnecessary. Rather, the women do exactly as they say they will in order to protect themselves. Thus, despite the menacing threats, Lysistrata ultimately seeks not violence, but moderation and mediation. This, once again, is consistent with her initial and driving concern throughout the play: to end excessive fighting.

Beyond this scene, there are even more sections which exhibit this same pattern of quick, heated, and absurdly violent threats from both the men and women (656-705, 797-828), only to result in no physical violence. As K. J. Dover notes in his book on Aristophanic comedy, in these scenes, the men and women’s “abusive words and threats of violence go on longer than (to our taste) humorous invention can be sustained” (Dover 154). Indeed, it seems tiringly excessive to have both sides speak at incredible length about abuse they will never end up enacting. Moreover, if the joke were simply that both sides were making empty threats, then surely one of these such scenes, rather than four, would be enough.

One might theorize that the reason Aristophanes includes the threats and leaves out the action is that he is averse to writing violent scenes in general. However, scenes from his other works rule out this possibility. In *The Birds*, Pisthetairus at

one point beats and chases off imposters, such as Meton (*Av.* 1012-1020). *The Frogs*, too, incorporates violence for comedic effect. Dionysus, dressed as Heracles, makes Xanthias, his slave, switch clothes with him out of fear that he will be punished by people who are angry with Heracles. However, Xanthias offers his “slave,” who is really his master, to Aeacus, saying, “take my slave and torture him, and when you convict me of wrongdoing, take me and kill me” (βασάνιζε γὰρ τὸν παῖδα τουτοῖ λαβὼν | κᾶν ποτέ μ’ ἔλης ἀδικοῦντ’, ἀπόκτεινόν μ’ ἄγων, *Ra.* 616-17). In the end, both Xanthias and Dionysus are beaten, as Aeacus attempts to figure out who is telling the truth. This violence is humorous, as it comes as a result of both Dionysus and Xanthias attempting to be clever and to outsmart Aeacus.

Further, *The Clouds* also contains violent language as well as outright physical violence visible to the audience. As the play draws to a close, Pheidippides turns his thoughts to violence. He asks his father if he beat him as a child (παῖδά μ’ ὄντ’ ἔτυπτες; *Nu.* 1409), and when his father says that he did, Pheidippides questions whether it is just to beat his father in the same way (εἰπέ δὴ μοι, | οὐ κἀμέ σοι δίκαιόν ἐστιν εὐνοεῖν ὁμοίως | τύπτειν τ’, *Nu.* 1410-12). After this debate, Pheidippides then states that he will beat his mother as well (τὴν μητέρ’ ὥσπερ καὶ σὲ τυπτήσω, *Nu.* 1444), an act which his father claims is an even greater evil (τοῦθ’ ἕτερον αὖ μείζον κακόν, *Nu.* 1445). His father then goes into a rage. He demands a torch and resolves to set fire to and destroy buildings with people still inside of them. When someone cries that he will destroy them (ἀπολεῖς, 1499), he says that that is what he wants (τοῦτ’ αὐτὸ γὰρ καὶ βούλομαι, *Nu.* 1499). This act of extreme brutality ends the play.

Thus Aristophanes, in several of his comedies, includes both violent words and deeds. Moreover, these acts of violence often serve some comedic or rhetorical purpose in the work. In fact, as Ian Ruffell argues, “one of the principal attributes of Old Comedy...is its aggression” (247, Ruffell). While *Lysistrata* is by no means lacking in verbal aggression, the absence of its physical counterpart becomes increasingly apparent each time it is withheld. The question the audience faces, then, is what reason

could Aristophanes have for repeatedly raising tension with abusive verbal attacks, while providing minimal physical relief?

One function this repeated denial of physical contact serves is that it mimics the tension and frustration the men and women are feeling due to the sex strike. As is made clear at several points, both the men and the women are strained by abstaining from sex. Lysistrata laments that the women are attempting to desert because they wish to have sex (*βινητιῶμεν, ἢ βράχιστον τοῦ λόγου*, 715). However, by using the first person plural form *βινητιῶμεν*, she indicates that she too feels the desire. On the men's side, Cinesias, when he comes to see Myrrhine, complains that there has been no joy in his life since she left the house, and that he cannot even enjoy eating, all due to his erection (865-9).

As mentioned above, when the sections of threats begin to build, they become fiercer, quicker, and more intense. In a similar way, the men and women provoke each other sexually and seek to inflame the other side. Especially in the later scenes, when the sex strike has been underway for days, the sexual tension is palpable. Thus, Aristophanes draws even more attention to this tension by teasing the audience into thinking there will be some sort of physical conflict, but always at the last minute snatches this possibility away. In the same way that Myrrhine taunts Cinesias relentlessly with promises of sex but never actually complies (870-953), Aristophanes dangles violence before the audience, but never quite lets them see it. In this way, the audience feels some of this deprivation of release that both the men and women in the play are also experiencing.

In a scene near the end of the play, Aristophanes sheds light on another reason why he has denied the audience any explicitly violent scenes. In this section, Lysistrata has convinced the men to reconcile with one another and has led them inside the Acropolis to swear an oath and celebrate. Outside, where slaves are sitting, an Athenian appears and orders them to clear the way. He threatens them, asking if he should burn them with a torch (*μῶν ἐγὼ τῆ λαμπάδι | ὑμᾶς κατακαύσω;*, 1217-18). Immediately after this, he then has an aside, directed at the audience, claiming that it is a “vulgar practice” that he “would rather not do” (*φορτικὸν τὸ χωρίον. οὐκ ἂν ποιήσαιμ’*, 1218-19).

In his commentary, Henderson notes that this would have then evoked some encouragement from the audience to carry out the act, so that the Athenian says that he will do it to appease them (Henderson 208).¹ As is expected by this point, he does not actually set fire to the slaves, as he is interrupted by the Spartans departing from the celebration.

Here, Aristophanes, through the character of the Athenian, refers to the act of burning someone as “vulgar” or even “clownish” (*φορτικόν*). In *The Clouds*, one of the chorus scenes expresses a similar idea. The chorus claims that when a play contains an old man who strikes another with a staff, this simply hides how poor the jokes are (*πρεσβύτης ὁ λέγων τᾶπη τῆ βακτηρία | τύπτει τὸν παρόντ’ ἀφανίζων πονηρὰ σκώμματα*, *Nu.* 541-2). They make clear that no such mindless violence will be included in the play, as it is “the wisest of all [Aristophanes’] comedies” (*ταύτην σοφώτατ’ ἔχειν τῶν ἐμῶν κωμωδιῶν*, *Nu.* 522). With these comments, the chorus equates wisdom and cleverness with the absence of foolish violence. Thus, in multiple works, Aristophanes expresses a resentment for violence that is unnecessary. He acknowledges that it has no purpose other than the fact that it pleases the crowd. This brief contemptuous aside could then apply to the other missed opportunities for physical violence throughout the rest of the play. Whereas in *The Clouds*, destruction functions as an end to the play, in *Lysistrata*, physically violent scenes would actually undermine the peace that the women are advocating. Thus, it is possible that Aristophanes saw no need to include physical violence, and due to his distaste for it, decided to draw attention to how unnecessary it is.

Lastly, it would be contradictory for the women to actively desire to fight with the men because their ultimate goal is to end fighting. As Daphne O’Reagan states, “the persuasion of *logos* and the agreement to use words instead of blows is key to the pact among citizens that founds community and to the laws and the practice of justice that preserve it” (O’Reagan 18-19). This is precisely what *Lysistrata* advocates when she attempts to talk to the men. Each ridiculous threat of violence that the men and women hurl at each other highlights the unproductivity and futility of fighting and threatening to fight. In

these sections of violent language, no progress is made toward peace. *Lysistrata* is eventually able to reconcile the men with reasoning, and not with violent claims.

Lysistrata is, at its core, about war and peace. The women, above all else, want their husbands to stop fighting, and it is this will which drives the whole play. As described in detail above, there are several scenes in which the men and women insult and threaten each other, but their words never materialize into the actions they boast. Aristophanes uses these opportunities to characterize the men in the play as overwhelmingly hot-tempered and irrational, while he at the same time characterizes the women as clever and more rational. While the women do engage in the abusive taunts and an unspecified degree of violence, they do this under the guise of self-defence. However, despite the practically endless talk, no one once gets struck in the jaw, nor does anyone get trampled upon. While this repeated pattern of empty threats may appear to be unnecessary, Aristophanes uses it rhetorically to heighten the point of the play itself. With respect to dramatic effect, he mirrors the strain of the abstention from sex with abstention from violence. It is through the denial of both that the men and women are eventually finally able to achieve peace. In addition, Aristophanes indicates that violence, and especially pointless violence, is foolish. Thus he purposefully and obviously leaves it out from the play, as if to mock the audience for enjoying and expecting it. By providing so many scenes of intense violent language with no actual physical confrontation, Aristophanes teases the audience just as the women tease the men and thereby highlights the foolishness of the claims and strengthens the necessity for peace over war.

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Notes

¹ Henderson also notes that this is similar to the beginning of *The Frogs* in which Xanthias and Dionysus discuss the “staleness” of certain comedic routines (Henderson 208).