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# A Phallic Play: Examining 5<sup>th</sup> Century Cultural References to Illuminate Aristophanes' Appeal for Peace to a Modern Audience

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A Phallic Play: Examining 5<sup>th</sup> Century Cultural References to Illuminate Aristophanes' Appeal  
for Peace to a Modern Audience

by

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Thesis

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### **Abstract**

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* is a popular work for contemporary production. Written in 411 BCE, the work explores what happens when the females of Athens participate in a sex strike in order to coerce the males to end the Peloponnesian War. By exploring cultural references to symbols in *Lysistrata*, mainly the phallus, this article seeks to convey the vehemence with which Aristophanes was advocating for an end of the Peloponnesian war and to demonstrate to theatre practitioners that *Lysistrata* is unique in its rhetoric about war and its destructive force on society. By understanding these significant cultural references, a modern director can help an audience better understand the specific themes of the work.

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## Introduction

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* is today one of the most popular extant Greek comedies. Most contemporary audiences appreciate the play's ribald humor and can access that humor because the jokes and puns are based, in large part, upon human anatomy and sexuality. As a result, those jokes translate well across various languages, cultures, and time periods. Consequently, though the play is over 2,000 years old, its comedy still resonates, as does its message. Though the sexual jokes are a prominent part of the work, the story is ultimately about war and peace—timeless themes with which modern audiences can easily relate.

The play has been an inspiration for a number of recent protests and actions. For example, *Lysistrata* was used as a protest to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2004. More than 1,000 readings in 59 countries were staged on that occasion to protest the invasion (Pollitt, *The Nation*, March 24). These readings were translated into multiple languages and staged with varying approaches to costumes, theatrical spaces, technical details, and acting. Some were full productions while some were simply public readings of the script. That contemporary audiences turn to the comedy in the face of present-day conflicts demonstrates its continuing significance.

Even the central premise—women withholding sex to secure an end to violence—resonates today. Recently a group of wives and girlfriends of gang members in Columbia's drug wars vowed to refrain from sexual contact until the men gave up violence. These women were inspired by *Lysistrata* (Brodzinsky). This idea of a real-life *Lysistrata* shows the appeal of the work and the inspiration it can have.

The three Greek dramatic unities—time, place, and action—can lead an audience to overlook the complexity of the arguments for peace contained in the work. The work has a simple premise, give up war or give up sex. The women make a pact to undertake a sex strike

that strips the men of sexual gratification until they agree to peace. The sexual frustration of the males results in comedic entertainment, and the simplicity of this premise allows for easy translation and understanding. This simplicity and ease of translation has helped the work remain popular; however, the ease of grasping the plot and humor also leads audiences to miss many of the cultural and social references Aristophanes intended. For instance, a play that revolved around the male reproductive organ would have carried many underlying meanings to a 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Athenian audience. By viewing the play through an ancient Athenian perspective, a modern director can understand the significance of a work that attacks the most prominent symbol of power in ancient Athens, the phallus. By understanding the strength of Aristophanes' cultural references, equally strong references can be made by contemporary practitioners. This understanding can then be translated into a contemporary comparison, such as a symbol of national pride like a flag, or an iconic religious symbol. By doing this the specific themes of the work can be conveyed to an audience, thus creating a greater understanding of the themes and strength by which Aristophanes was arguing for peace.

Ancient Athens was a culture that revolved around phallic worship, a commonality between Indo-European people of the time:

The male organ of generation was taken by the majority of the Indo-European peoples as well as by Semites and Egyptians, as the chief symbol of ... continued life and fertility, the magic charm against the influences of barrenness and death ... The phallus takes its part not merely in every agricultural and pastoral rite, but in most regions of religious worship. (Murray 5)

Athens, however, having made the phallus more than a basic symbol of fertility, focused so intensively on the phallus that many scholars refer to the culture as a phallocracy.

Indeed, the phallus showed up in virtually every arena of ancient Greek society. Keuls writes that the phallocracy of Athens was “a cultural system symbolized by the image of the male reproductive organ in permanent erection, the phallus” (2). Public displays of phalluses were commonplace in ancient Athens, more so than most other societies, it would seem. “As foreigners were astonished to see, Athenian men habitually displayed their genitals, and their city was studded with statues of gods with phalluses happily erect” (Keuls 2). These statues that Keuls refers to are the Herms, were statues of Hermes that were at most homes, most public squares, and which were even decorated with flowers for holidays (390). Additionally, the phallus played a prominent role in the theatre itself.

Crowds going to the theatre in Athens would have proceeded behind a large phallic symbol. “In the phallic procession, the ceremonies centre round the sacred emblem of human fertility, borne high upon a pole” (Cornford 113). Upon entering, the audience would have then noticed the large, padded phalluses adorning the male characters. Within the play itself, audiences would have heard numerous references to the phallus; these lines illustrate a stylistic quality for which Aristophanes would have been known, as many of his works make overt references to the phalluses worn by the actors.

Undoubtedly, the ubiquitous phallic symbol held a myriad of meanings for the Athenians, meanings that have been lessened, reduced, watered-down, or outright lost to modern audiences. As *Lysistrata* makes such prominent use of these symbols, scholars and dramaturges should seek to fully understand the phallic references in order to fully understand the work. The phallus was a symbol of fertility, both human and agricultural; it was a symbol of luck and of strength over women. It was also a symbol of maleness, patriarchy, and all of the rights and privileges associated with being a male.

Men had a great deal of dominance over women in ancient Athens. Women could not vote. They were confined, in most instances, to the houses or the *domos*. Females had little role in citizenship and, in fact, few of their names are even recorded in official logs (Keuls 390). Allusions to all of these social realities would have been apparent to the original audience of Athens, but not to contemporary audiences. Knowledge of this background unlocks many of the underlying messages that Aristophanes assumed his audiences would have understood.

Contemporary directors, actors, and audiences, often view *Lysistrata* as a sexual play that promotes peace. However, without a solid understanding of the meanings of Aristophanes' references a modern production cannot duplicate the strength of Aristophanes' argument. Because of its cultural references and use of the phallus, *Lysistrata* is one of Aristophanes most ardent appeal for peace, and with a thorough understanding of these references, a modern director can select suitable contemporary cultural icons to complement those of the phallus.

In the time of writing this work Athens was in a dire position, on the brink of defeat. Into this tumult Aristophanes interjected a work that attacks the most ubiquitous power symbol in Athens, the phallus. To make an attack on so prominent a symbol is a bold move, even for a playwright known for his social commentary. The sexual humor often becomes a focal point for the play. This can lead to a misunderstanding of the various anti-war messages embedded within the work. Modern productions often miss the vehemence with which Aristophanes was advocating for peace. In my own experience with the work I often noticed myself and my actors emphasizing the sexual humor and missing the strength with which Aristophanes argues for peace. It is easy to focus on the sexual humor. But, a more challenging choice would be to recreate Aristophanes' argument for peace by utilizing equally prominent cultural symbols in a



contemporary production. However, to choose a fitting symbol a modern practitioner needs to understand the significance of Aristophanes' original symbol, the phallus.

In this paper, I will look at the cultural and religious significance of phalluses to the ancient Athenians and apply those significances to various aspects of *Lysistrata* to offer greater insight into Aristophanes' intentions of arguing for an end to the Peloponnesian war. On a textual note, unless otherwise noted, all citations from the text of *Lysistrata* come from Jeffery Henderson's 1980 translation.

### **Lysistrata's Context**

*Lysistrata* was first performed in a tumultuous time in Athens's history. Originally performed at the Lenea festival of 411 BCE, it is one of Aristophanes' peace plays (Henderson 153, in Yale Classics). These plays all advocated for an end to the Peloponnesian war and peace with Sparta. Peace was a common subject for Aristophanes among the plays of his we currently possess. "Eleven of the forty plays thought to have been written by him between 427 and 388 have survived. Nine of these were produced during the Peloponnesian War" (Spatz 16). Four of these surviving plays have peace as a central theme (Dillon 99). It is not surprising that war, with its tendency to divide and galvanize a society and highlight a culture's true nature, would become fodder for a playwright. What is surprising about *Lysistrata* is its timing.

In the time of *Lysistrata*, Athens was under constant attack from Sparta and its allies. The attacks came predominantly in the summer, and every year they virtually destroyed Athens's crops. "The area outside Athens was abandoned to the enemy. For the past six summers [in 425], all the farmers of Attica had retreated within the city walls to watch as the Spartan invaders ravaged their fields" (Spatz 30). Consequently, when *Lysistrata* premiered, agricultural fertility would have been a sensitive issue.

Other factors were also shaking the Athenian polis. The Athenians were not doing well in the war. "Since 413 Athens had lost its most capable generals, many of its soldiers, the silver mines stopped mining, naval superiority was no longer a certainty, and many of their allies were distancing themselves" (Newiger 152). Furthermore, a Sicilian expedition of hoplites and triremes in the early 5th century ended in disaster. Hugill writes about the impact this disaster had on Ancient Athens' military confidence. "The Sicilian disaster not only sobered and depressed Athenians, but it shook their confidence in themselves." This disaster took the lives of

nearly a third of the entire male population of Athens and devastated the city (Meinick). This string of events likely shook the Athenian confidence and could have further compelled Aristophanes to make a stronger appeal for peace than he had before.

One indication of Athens' vulnerable position lies in the creation of an oligarchy. The Athenians cherished their democratic system of governance and saw it as superior to their foes'. However, the failing war effort led them to hand the management of the war over to a group rather than to the polis. Writing of this transition from democracy to oligarchy, Hugill writes, "The change of heart is strikingly evinced in the creation of ten Probuli to assume the supreme direction of the state's affairs" (Hugill 2). With the formerly stalwart governmental system in flux, Aristophanes seized on the opportunity to produce a play full of social and cultural references that ardently advocate for peace.

The main character, Lysistrata, leads the women of Athens and Sparta on a sex strike. Their strike has one objective: to persuade the men of Athens and Sparta to negotiate an end to the Peloponnesian war. The older women of Athens take over the Acropolis (the treasury of Athens) while the younger women consistently taunt the males to keep them aroused. By presenting a confluence of cultural, political and domestic issues, Aristophanes took advantage of an Athens in flux to make his strongest appeal for peace.

## The Physical Representation of the Penis in Ancient Athenian Theatre

Not only was the male productive organ a prominent cultural emblem of Ancient Athens (e.g., Herms), it also served as a pivotal component of Athenian theatre practice. It was used in the *komos*, the procession through Athens to bring people to the theatre, (i.e., phallic komos), and was in fact the source of comic plays as a dramatic form. Subsequently, male actors in comedies would have stood out by their large padded phalluses that featured predominantly in their costumes.

The stage conventions of ancient Athens included two known pieces, the large padded phallus and the mask. When speaking about the actors' costumes in the ancient Athenian theatre, Kitto points out, "Not much is known about the costume in Old Comedy except that he [the actor] too wore a mask and (usually) the phallus and was grotesquely padded" (Kitto 338). The assertion by Kitto is also backed up by Murray, who writes, "Vases show that the actors wore visible artificial phalli..."(3). These artificial phalli would have been a keen indicator between genders in the theatre. As the actors also wore masks, it might have been necessary to include some sort of other costume feature to differentiate genders. This padded phallus would have served that purpose. Aristophanes appears to make use of the theatrical convention of the time throughout his works. In *Lysistrata*, a play that speaks specifically about sexual frustration and erections that cause difficulty in walking, a "grotesquely padded" phallus would provide a humorous outlet for jokes.

Contemporary productions often make use of this costume element to secure a comedic response from the audience and it seems logical that the Athenians would have done the same. "There is little doubt that the attic comic actors commonly secured comic effect by extravagant padding of the person" (261). The comedy of this element is two-fold. The pun of a large male

reproductive organ offers an element of sexual humor while the costume piece would also force the actor to walk in a stylized manner similar to that of a bow-legged cowboy. Additionally, references to the “grotesque padding” appear throughout the script and increase as the play progresses. As the men become more sexually frustrated by the women, their padded phallus gets more prominent, or more erect.

Many of the lines that exhibit this physical change in costume come toward the end of the play. By the final scenes of the play the phalluses the actors wear are so large that the visiting Spartan delegation is accused of having a hidden weapon. The Athenian soldier, at line 980, realizes his mistake and exclaims, “That’s a hard on, rogue!” The Spartan actor at this point must be wearing a phallus so large that it is easily mistaken for a sword or a spear. At line 1000 the same Spartan remarks that they are forced to “walk around like men with a hernia problem.” This comedic element would surely have provided a great deal of humor to the audience, but it would also have provided a commentary to those able to understand it.

Large phalluses are one of the many ancient Athenian stage conventions which Aristophanes employs to make a poignant statement about the males of Athens. In ancient Athenian culture a large male reproductive organ was something associated with barbarism. To Athenians in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E., “large sex organs were considered coarse and ugly and were banished to the domains of abstraction, of caricature, of satyrs and of barbarians” (Keuls 68). Thus, as the play progresses and the characters appear with ever-growing phalluses, an ancient Athenian audience would certainly have found humor in their struggle, but would also have likely have made the connection between a large penis and “caricature, of satyrs, and barbarians.”

A contemporary audience would also find humor in an ever-increasing phallus and the sexual frustration of the males, but they would lack the social knowledge of ancient Athens and thus would not make a connection that Aristophanes likely wanted his audience to understand. The characters advocating for a continuation of the war appear more barbaric as they continue to put up resistance to peace. While a contemporary audience would be amused by the continued sexual frustration of the characters an ancient Athenian audience would have seen beyond simple sexual frustration and equated the males with barbarians. For a contemporary production, discovery of this reference to barbarism could easily be portrayed in other aspects of the show. Actors could employ more barbaric physicality; line delivery could be more aggressive. There are a number of ways to accentuate this underlying message of barbarism. But, without an understanding of the Athenian views on penis size, this connection is completely missed by contemporary directors and actors.

A further reference to this social belief of ancient Athens is found in the end of the play when the Spartan and Athenian delegates have agreed to peace and must negotiate the settlement. In order to do so they need a map on which to draw the boundaries. Lysistrata calls for one and, when it is produced, it adds to the sexual frustration of the males. The item to be used for a map is a naked woman whose name can be translated as Reconciliation. The males comment on the beauty and sensuality of the woman before finally using her body as a map. The allusions to sexual pleasure here are readily apparent; the naked woman will further aggravate the sexually deprived men. Yet, in addition to this message, Aristophanes stresses that peace and reconciliation are needed to end both the war and the sex strike; only reconciliation will bring the wives and husbands back together. Thus, it seems only apt that Reconciliation is not simply an idea, but in this case, is a personified entity over which the two warring parties are lusting.

Adding to the tension, the relief of sexual frustration will also relieve the cause of the males' significantly enlarged phalluses. By satisfying their sexual needs, the men will alleviate their engorged male reproductive organs, the very thing which would make them appear barbaric or satyr-like to their audiences. Thus, "Reconciliation" will not only end the war and the sex strike, but will also make the symbolic representation of the males less barbaric and more civilized. Given Aristophanes' poignant use of social and cultural references, as well as his use of theatrical conventions of the times, we can assume that the playwright was mindful of these concepts when he wrote the scene. Aristophanes commonly used social norms and cultural beliefs to teach his audiences the error of their ways and try to correct them. It seems fitting that he would use sexual frustration and the grotesquely padded phallus as a way to instruct them in the barbarism of their warring ways and use Reconciliation to help them realize the solution.

Aristophanes, being a literate, educated Athenian, would equate the large phallus to the "domains of abstraction, of caricature, of satyrs and of barbarians." The references to an abnormally large, continually growing phallus demonstrated to the ancient audience that, as they continue to refuse peace and reconciliation, men become increasingly more barbaric. While modern productions can easily use this to great comic effect, they miss a pivotal underlying message that those who advocate for destructions are barbaric and only when reconciliation is reached will they return to civility.

## Fertility

Fertility was a common concern among the residents of most ancient civilizations, and even more so among the Athenians of the 5th Century BCE due to the ongoing Peloponnesian War. The war effort required a great deal of food and Athens had taken to abandoning its most fertile land to the Spartan invaders every summer. As a result, many symbols in ancient Athens had fertility and agricultural references attached to them. These symbols were present in nearly every social and cultural function of the city. The most common of these was the phallus.

The Ancient Athenian culture used the phallic symbol in many rituals. Chief among them was the use of the phallus as a symbol of life, both human and agricultural. Gilbert Murray, who has written extensively on Aristophanes, comments on the use of the phallus in ancient times: “The most obvious and pressing desire of a primitive community was continued life; its chief fear was death or barrenness. And the ideas of fertility or barrenness were applied without differentiation to the fruits of the fields, the increase of flocks and herds, and the births of the tribe itself” (4). Further down on the same page, Murray goes on to say, “The male organ of generation was taken by the majority of the indo-European peoples, as well as by Semites and Egyptians, as the chief symbol of this continued life and fertility, the magic charm against the influences of barrenness and death.” This belief of the phallus as a kind of magic charm helps to explain its prevalence in ancient Athens. As Murray points out, there were a great number of important societal elements attached to the symbol of the phallus. The Athenians adopted these symbols and added a few more of their own.

One of the primary focuses of the phallus in Athens was its connection to agriculture. Dillon writes “Human sexuality was emphasized as an extension of agricultural fertility” (101). Human fertility and agricultural fertility went hand-in-hand in Ancient Athens. They were



inseparable. One cannot grow without the other. Murray also wrote that in Athens the phallus took on a symbolism of “agricultural fertility” and “tribal growth” (7). For any society to increase in population, the amount of food produced must also increase. For this reason it is apparent why these two items are so closely linked in the ancient Athenian lifestyle.

The Athenians also linked this symbolism to the ritual of the theatre. If we take this connection of the phallus to agricultural fertility and apply it to the theatre, then we begin to see a large number of connections between the phallic worship of the theatre and agricultural fertility. This connection becomes even more evident when we look at *Lysistrata*.

*Lysistrata* was written in the time of Old Comedy. The very origins of Old Comedy were phallic performances. Thus, the genre *Lysistrata* fits into has its origins in phallic worship. In Chapter 4 of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, he writes that comedy originated “from the leaders of the phallic performances.” This work is one of the few sources of material written within the centuries following Aristophanes’ writing. Murray elaborates on these “phallic performances” and writes that the origin of Old Comedy “must have been a phallic komos intended to stimulate the fertility of the land, the flocks, and the people” (7). The idea—presented in many cultures of the time—was that human fertility would result in divine fertility, thus impacting the land and ultimately yielding a good harvest.

In the time of *Lysistrata*, this phallic tradition was still present in the theatre. To get to the theatre of Ancient Athens one had to participate in a phallic procession. “In the month of Gamelion, roughly corresponding to January, the citizens celebrated the Lenaea which included a procession and sacrifices as well as dramatic performances in the god’s [Dionysus] sacred precinct at the base of the Acropolis” (Spatz 19). Given that we have evidence of *Lysistrata* being presented at the Lenaea of 411 B.C.E., it is likely that the audience of that first production

participated in this procession. Fittingly, this procession centered “around the sacred emblem of human fertility, borne high upon a pole” (Cornford 113). The sacred emblem that led spectators to the theatre for the first production of *Lysistrata* was a phallus. Considering the overt sexuality of the play, it is appropriate that the audiences would have followed a large penis “borne high upon a pole” to arrive at the performance. Once they arrived they were met with even more phallic and fertility references.

Aristophanes is the only playwright from the Old Comedy period for whom we have extant works; consequently, we cannot compare him thoroughly to his contemporaries when it comes to using fertility and phallic references. His works do, however, feature the phallus and fertility quite heavily. He also frequently used agricultural and phallic references in his works, notably his peace plays.

Aristophanes wrote four peace plays of which we have extant copies. There is a fifth, *Farmers*, of which we have only fragments. Dillon writes that “*The Acharnians*, *The Assembly Women*, *Peace*, and *Lysistrata* all focus on the need for an end of the Peloponnesian war. A fifth, *Farmers*, also seems to talk of peace; however, we only have fragments of this work” (101). In these works agriculture and fertility figure prominently. In *Acharnians*, the main character Dikapolis establishes his own, individual peace with Sparta and, as a result, he receives abundant food and luxuries that his compatriots are doing without. Namely, he receives food and agricultural items that the Athenians, in this period of war, are no doubt missing and longing for. This element reinforces the feeling of longing likely felt by Aristophanes’ audience and reminds them that peace will give Athens access to the luxuries it misses. In *Peace*, life is distorted to such an extent that the normal way of life is inverted. “War is figured as a chaotic inversion of normality, as is symbolized by the confusion of food and excrement in the dung beetle's

nutritional preferences...” (Tordoff 171). In the play the dung beetle has taken to eating delicacies while the humans have taken to eating dung. In both works, “war is depicted as the enemy of nature ... while peace not only restores harmony with nature, but seems even to inaugurate a sort of Golden Age” (Dillon 98). Aristophanes continually used this dramatic element to remind his audience what they were missing and show them that peace would return it to them.

Another play, of which we only possess fragments, alludes to the same agricultural philosophy that war destroys and peace results in abundance. *Farmers* appears to expand on a theme of war and peace presented in other of Aristophanes’ works: the idea that peace brings about agricultural abundance. Dillon elaborates on this connection:

The very title of Aristophanes' *Farmers* is already suggestive; the play has been dated to the late 420's and contains a wish to stop the war and start working in the fields again; bread and wine are among the hoped-for joys, and the wish is addressed to “Peace steeped in wealth, and my little team of oxen.” (fr.111 PCG). In addition, the problematic “second” Peace, whatever its date or relationship to the extant play, likewise continues the agricultural associations of peace. Most explicit is fragment 305 PCG., spoken by Farming herself

(Fa.) For all mankind am I of dearest Peace  
the trusted nurse, stewardess, helpmate  
guardian, daughter, sister-all these are my lot.

(B.) Well, what's your name?

(Fa): My name? Farming. (102).

*Farmers* predates *Lysistrata* by nine years and would appear to follow a similar agricultural argument used by Aristophanes in *Peace*. The argument is that war is a bastardization of normal human life and leads to a reversal, or distortion, of natural events. Tordoff writes, “In *Peace*, war is figured as a chaotic inversion of normality, as is symbolized by the confusion of food and excrement in the dung beetle's nutritional preferences and reinforced by the ubiquitous references connecting war with unappetizing food (e.g., War's salad and soldiers' campaigning rations) ...” (171). Tordoff's assertion reflects Dillon's observation that in Aristophanes' works, “War is depicted as the enemy of nature ... while peace not only restores harmony with nature, but seems even to inaugurate a sort of Golden Age” (98). This golden age is a time of agricultural abundance and population growth, two elements that are intricately connected to the phallus as a fertility symbol. The conclusion is that as an “enemy of nature,” war desiccates the landscape and ultimately leads to the destruction of the population. Therefore, when twenty-first century audiences view *Lysistrata*, they must consider the agricultural references for which Aristophanes was known. Given the strong tie between phalluses and agriculture, it seems prudent to view the phalluses in *Lysistrata* as tied to agriculture. This connection to agriculture is compounded when we look at the status of Athens in 411 BCE, when *Lysistrata* premiered.

Fertility and agricultural abundance were very important to the Athenians in 411 BCE. Athens was a large city and, with an ongoing war, needed plenty of food. But during that period in the war, Athens had resorted to abandoning its lands outside of the city walls and sheltering behind them for half of the year. “The area outside Athens was abandoned to the enemy. For the past six summers [in 425], all the farmers of Attica had retreated within the city walls to watch as the Spartan invaders ravaged their fields” (Spatz 30). Athens was in a difficult situation because they could not protect their food source during the summer months when the Spartans attacked

the city. This would have made the original audience of *Lysistrata* keenly aware of the need for plentiful agricultural fertility. The idea of watching invading armies destroy fields and crops would surely have brought up sad memories for Aristophanes' audiences. But, Aristophanes did not shy away from painful memories. In fact, Aristophanes seems to have seen it as his duty to instruct his audience. As McLeish writes, Aristophanes "constantly reiterates claims such as that grown-ups have poets to teach them, just as children have tutors" such as in *Frogs* 1054-1056 (59).

*Lysistrata*, as a play about a sex strike, contains a number of sexual references, but it is important to view these sexual references as they tie into the agricultural fertility and human fertility that is so important to ancient Athenian society. From the very first line of the play, Aristophanes makes a reference to sexuality and fertility. The title character, Lysistrata, opens with the line, "Now if someone had invited them to a revel for Bacchus, or to Pan's shrine, or to Genetyllis' at Colias, the streets would be impassable." To an Athenian in 411 BCE this line would have conveyed multiple meanings. First, because the Lenaea was a festival for Dionysus, the original audience was at a revel for Bacchus. Undoubtedly, this fact would be ironically humorous for the audience. Secondly, all of the Gods she mentions have erotic associations (Henderson, Introduction to *Lysistrata* 266). Consequently, the first line of the play tells the audience that this will be an erotic play full of sexual reference. It also plays on the comic irony that the audience is present at a revel for Bacchus.

Another fertility and phallic reference comes in the early part of the play when the men confront the rebellious females. At line 390, the men attempt to retake the Acropolis and are attacked by women with hot water. The four succeeding lines are:

Men: Scald us? Stop! We've had enough!

Women: Maybe now you'll start to blossom.

Men: No, we'll wither up instead.

Women: You brought the fire: Warm yourselves.

These lines carry a number of meanings. The overt sexual message is that the water will cause them to become cold and the size of their penises will shrink. There is also the reference to water and blossoming. If the men are cooled down and act less "hot headed," then perhaps they will grow. An additional and subtler reference can be found in the sexual pun of a shrunken penis. With a shrunken penis there is no chance of sexual intercourse and thus reproduction is wholly impossible. Consequently, if their phallic symbol "withers up" they will be in dire straits indeed.

A few pages later in the script *Lysistrata* laments the fact that the young, fertile men have all been sent to war. At line 587, in Henderson's earlier version, *Lysistrata* says, "Then, when we ought to be having fun and enjoying our bloom of youth, we sleep alone because of the campaigns. And to say no more about our own case, it pains me to think of the maidens growing old in their rooms." The Magistrate responds that while the young men are off at war there are still useful men for the maidens to marry; useful because they can still get an erection. Then he acquiesces that the ones that still can are in "short supply."

This line would have hit home the point, to the Ancient Athenians, that their most important production of fertility, Athenian sons, was endangered by this war. The most common symbol for a phallus to take is an erect penis. This conversation between *Lysistrata* and the Magistrate remind the audience that those males who can obtain this state of arousal are in short supply and are decreasing in number. The male organ of reproduction is an important symbol of fertility for the Athenians watching Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* in 411 BCE and, given the

playwright's use of farming and fertility in previous works, it seems likely he meant for his audience to understand that if there is no peace there will be no crops, no sons, and no future for Athens.

The argument for fertility—legitimate sons specifically—is given even more strength by the persons perpetrating the sex strike—the wives. In a speech cited by Keuls on page 59, the orator states, “We keep hetaerae for pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our body and wives for the bearing of legitimate children and to keep watch over our house.” In this speech from fifth century Athens, the orator openly acknowledges the fact that wives were not needed for sexual gratification but rather for “the bearing of legitimate children.” Therefore, when it is the wives who execute the sex strike, it may be humorous to watch the men suffer from a lack of sexual gratification, but it would be apparent to the audience in 411 BCE that without those wives there could be no legitimate children.

A final reference to agriculture and fertility comes in the end of the play. The Spartan delegation and the Athenians have agreed to peace. But, the terms still need to be decided. When they demand a map, Lysistrata provides them a naked woman, aptly named Reconciliation. The lines that follow are nearly one sexual reference after another, and they carry with them a corresponding relation to agricultural and human fertility.

Line 1157:

Spartan Ambassador: I never saw so well-endowed a woman!

Athenian Ambassador: I never saw a better-looking pussy

The underlying implication here is that she is fertile (and thus able to bear children), as well as desirable. From an agricultural perspective, her fertile land is needed in order to plant a crop.

Line 1167:

Athenian Ambassador: Let's see now, I know, give us first of all/ the furry triangle here,  
the gulf that runs/ behind it, also the two connecting legs.

This sexual reference to the female anatomy puns on the connection to topographical features, making it is also agricultural. The “gulf that runs behind” it implies moisture, which is imperative for farming. Finally, when the two warring sides have settled on an agreeable solution, they are ready to complete the transaction.

Line 1172:

Athenian Ambassador: I'm all set to strip and do a little ploughing!

Spartan Ambassador: Me first: before one ploughs one spreads manure!

The sexual reference here is to anal sex. But, again, there is an agricultural message, this time more overt. There is a reference to ploughing and the easily understood metaphor to have sex. However, there is an interesting message here that extends beyond the overt reference to farming with manure and ploughing. When comparing these three examples we see a connection to farming in each. A farmer must first find fertile land, in this case the body of Reconciliation. Second, they prepare the soil for seeding, either by tilling or watering. Third, they plant the seed and fertilize it. The sexual jokes made over the body of the naked Reconciliation are also the steps necessary for a farmer to produce a crop. Thus, the end of the war brings about an increase in fertility, both agricultural and human, and its primary method is through Reconciliation.

This conclusion of the war is similar to the other of Aristophanes' peace plays. The play ends with the reconciliation of the two sides and brings about an agricultural golden age. Aristophanes displayed an acute knowledge of agriculture in his previous works and continues it with *Lysistrata*. “Here the antinomy between frustrated war and liberated peace is symbolized by



using as a map on which to plot truce terms not a piece of paper or leather, but the contours of a desirable girl, Reconciliation herself. When the Athenian and Spartan lust for the girl, they are lusting for reconciliation: as always the point is simple, but the moral overtones .... are rich and resonant (McLeish 159)” Aristophanes argues for peace in such a way that will illicit humor from his audience but still drive home the point that the war will destroy Athens.

The play ends with the reconciliation of the two sides and brings about an agricultural golden age. Aristophanes displayed an acute knowledge of agriculture in his previous works and continues it with *Lysistrata*. He does it in such a way that will illicit humor from his audience but still drives home the point that the war will destroy Athens. At least one scholar openly states that this was a gift Aristophanes had. Cooper asserts that Aristophanes was more gifted for using the natural connection of fertility and agriculture than his contemporaries. “Some knowledge of external nature belonged to the Old Comedy in relation to the Dionysian cult of fertility, but in his amazing knowledge of it Aristophanes doubtless surpassed his rivals” (xix). It is impossible to make a thorough comparison of this fact because we only possess extant plays of one playwright from Old Comedy, Aristophanes. Nevertheless, it does show that scholars feel Aristophanes knew how to utilize symbolism of farming and fertility better than his contemporaries. In *Lysistrata* he uses it to convey a dire message of Athens’ destruction with a work that kept his audience laughing.

In 411 BCE Athens was greatly concerned with agricultural stability. Having given up their fields as lost every summer and retreated behind the walls, *Lysistrata* would be an incredibly painful reminder of their dire situation. Most contemporary productions have no comparison to draw upon. Only if an audience were starving and suffering from famine could they truly appreciate the strength of Aristophanes’ message. However, a contemporary director

can utilize theatrical conventions to convey this message. References to farming, a barren field behind the actors, or simply emphasizing these important lines would aid a modern audience in grasping some of the dire warnings Aristophanes was giving to his original audience.

### Female Emasculation

The Athenian male populace in 411 B.C.E. had a well-documented fear of female revolt and emasculation. Myths, statues, and jagged symbols adorned ancient Athens. Keuls writes “snaky Medusa heads, the jagged aegis of Athena, and a whole cupboard full of female monsters ... are rightly considered as revealing Greek men’s fear of the vagina dentata, the emasculating machinery of female revenge” (126). Even the major mythological icons of the period speak of the imagery that “reflects ... castration fears” (Keuls 126) held by the Athenian males. When viewed through this lens of a fear of “female revenge,” *Lysistrata* becomes a work that reflects a genuine anxiety over open female rebellion. However, the level at which women were controlled makes it difficult to see such a revolt as a possibility.

As pointed out in Keul’s work, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*; a female revolt seems nearly impossible. Women were rarely ever let out of the house and it was even rarer that they would assemble in any great number. However, the fear was present, and it was the major plot focus of two works by Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* and *The Assembly Women*. Keuls also writes “In the face of such massive repression, even an internal moral resistance would have required supernatural psychic strength on the part of the woman” (Keuls 128). Therefore, it seems unlikely that the females would revolt, but there was a fear of it happening, and Aristophanes utilized that fear.

Alternately, the idea of a sex strike was not completely unknown to the Athenian males. “In all female cults such as the Thesmophoria, married women used, as in the sex strike here, temporary sexual segregation, neglect of domestic duties, and abstinence, as well as invective, to promote fertility and public welfare” (Foley 8). There was precedence for a sex strike by the females of Athens, and though, with Keul’s observations of male dominance over female in

Athens, it seems difficult to conceive of a full out revolt, such as in *Lysistrata*, it is possible to believe that the women might have withheld sexual gratification for a time. Thus, giving Aristophanes a source in reality for a fictional comedy.

The female was responsible for the oikos and the male the polis, and these roles appear to have been strictly enforced. “The dominance of male over female was so complete during the period in question as that of master over slave” (Keuls 6). Consequently, though the roles were defined with such oppression, it seems understandable as to why the males feared a female revolt. They possibly understood that if they were in such a repressed position they might revolt themselves. If the atmosphere of submission and control was as prevalent as sources lead us to believe, then it comes as no surprise that the male populace would fear losing control of such a well-regulated item.

Given Aristophanes’ proclivity to using known fears, such as fertility, war, and starvation, it seems appropriate that the fear of emasculating females would be used as a major plot in at least one of his works. The women in *Lysistrata* do not physically emasculate any men, but they certainly render the male organ of reproduction completely useless. By their sex strike they are denying the phallus, or erect penis, its primary bodily function. Also, though the women do not physically emasculate a man, there is reference to exactly that within the lines of *Lysistrata*. Aristophanes mentions one of the most fearful emasculation crimes in Athen’s history towards the end of *Lysistrata*.

One prime example of the prevalence of the phallus in ancient Athens is the Herm statues. The statues, modeled after the god Hermes, were placed in public squares and outside of many Athenian homes. The Hermes statues, called Herms were one of the most ubiquitous phallic sights in Athens (Keuls 390). It was even customary for the phallus on the statues to be

decorated with flowers around holidays and celebrations. Any damage done to these statues would be seen as a rather strong attack on the most prominent fertility symbol in Athens.

In 415 BCE, just before the Sicilian expedition and during the Adonia festival, many of the Herms were castrated in one night. This was four years prior to Lysistrata's debut and during a time of great trial in the Peloponnesian war. Thucydides addresses this desecration in 6.27 of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. "In the meantime the Mercuries of stone throughout the whole city of Athens (now there were many of these of square set up by the law of the place, and many in the porches of private houses and in the temples) had in one night most of them their faces pared." The translation mentions faces, which also relates to "front." Therefore, the fronts of these statues were "pared" in one night. Thucydides goes onto write that Alcibiades was accused of the crime by those who were jealous of him (6.28 and 6.29). However, no one seems to have been charged or convicted of the crime (Keuls 388). Ultimately, the crime went unsolved. It was certainly not for a lack of effort on the part of the Athenian government though. Keuls describes a veritable witch hunt must have occurred to find the culprits on pages 385-390. The women, however, never seem to have been openly suspected and Keuls makes a compelling argument for the women of Athens being the perpetrators:

The Adonia was being celebrated about this time, which gave the women temporary freedom of movement. We know that they roamed around the city at night during the fateful events, because a woman named Agariste testified that she saw Alcibiades desecrate the mysteries at the house of Charmides, and she identified several other male participants as well (391).

The government of Athens took a strong stance against this attack. They viewed the crime as “a subversive act, indicative of plots to overthrow the government” (Keuls 388). Also of note is that Hermes, the god whose statues were attacked, was also the God of travel and the attack must have cast “an ominous spell over the preparations for the [Sicilian] expedition” (Keuls 388). It was the disaster of this expedition, which put the Athenians in the disadvantaged position in which they find themselves in 411 B.C.E.

Aristophanes makes a slight, but poignant reference to these Herm statues in *Lysistrata* towards the end of the play; Aristophanes references the attack on the Herms. Most translations do not carry this reference. In the translation Keuls uses in *The Reign of The Phallus*, it is mentioned in lines 1093-94. The chorus warns the Spartans, who enter with fully erect penises, “If you are smart, you will cover up with your shirt, so that the herm choppers won’t catch sight of you.” This simple statement carries with it a strong message, that the Herm choppers are the females, namely the females leading the revolt in *Lysistrata*.

It is interesting that Aristophanes chooses to recall an act that greatly shook the polis in 415 and the fallout of which had not fully subsided in 411. The act was interpreted by the government of the time as a protest of the war and a subversive element within the state. The destruction of the phallus was seen as an attack on all of the religious symbolism it holds to Athenians. The most prominent of these religious symbols was that of fertility. Recalling such an attack, on the most prominent fertility symbol in Athens is a simple, but strong, reminder to the polis present at the play, that the women should be heeded.

Keuls sums up this sentiment by writing “I can see no other explanation for Aristophanes’ sudden preoccupation with female protest than that he... knew or suspected that the castration of the herms had been perpetrated by women” (395). Given the significance of the

phallus, and of the Herms in Athens, the male populace was likely even more guarded than normal about a female revolt. *Lysistrata*'s sex strike comes at a time when the male phallus was already on increased guard against emasculation. The herm mutilation had made the Athenian society even more protective of their greatest religious symbol. A play with the phallus taking such a prominent role would have been a timely reminder to the audience about a crime against the phallus and what it stood for. It is also an apt target for the argument of fertility being inhibited by war.

Aristophanes did not shy away from painful memories or from poking fun at serious elements of society. In this way he used his works to present a mirror to society and show his audience their flaws and errors. With *Lysistrata* he used a number of social and religious cues to demonstrate to the audience the need for peace. A twenty-first century audience often misses these social and religious cues. Specifically in a play that can be viewed as an emasculating work, such references are telling.

*Lysistrata* negates the various uses of the phallus in one way or another. By entering a sex strike the women are negating the use of the penis as a reproductive organ. In the lines about farming Aristophanes demonstrates the lack of fertility, an important connection to the phallus. Then, near the end of the play, Aristophanes strikes a final blow by reminding his entire audience of a physical removal of the phallus from the Herms. In a work that gradually negates the numerous meanings of the phallus this is a fitting final attack, a reminder of the literal emasculation of the phallus from the most prominent statues in Athens. Aristophanes is not simply advocating for peace with *Lysistrata*, he is telling his audience the consequences of their actions, destruction of their civilization through negation of Athens most prominent symbol of power.

## Conclusion

In my own experience with this work I found myself and my actors becoming preoccupied with the humor of the piece and, ultimately, missing an important layer of meanings that Aristophanes wanted his audience to understand. This is a comical play that survives in large part because of the physical comedy and sexual innuendo. To focus on those aspects is a disservice to the work as a whole. Aristophanes had ardently advocated for peace in his other works and in *Lysistrata* he makes what could be his most ardent appeal for peace ever. The underlying message of the play is that this war will destroy Athenian society. The situation Athens finds itself in when Aristophanes wrote *Lysistrata* is dire and, as Westlake writes, Athens would not “be in a perilous situation if they had the good sense to accept the advice offered by him in earlier plays” (53). Now, Athens is on the brink of destruction and Aristophanes uses *Lysistrata* to hit at the very heart of the Athenian culture: fertility, procreation, and ultimately, their manhood.

*Lysistrata* is a powerful work with a strong message conveyed through vastly humorous means that often obscure the vehemence with which Aristophanes was arguing for peace with Sparta. Contemporary directors, actors, and producers looking to recreate this two-thousand-year-old work, can miss some of the strength of the argument by focusing on the sexual puns in the play. It is imperative that they understand the social and cultural connections Aristophanes wrote with his original audience in mind so that they can find fitting modern equivalents.

The script itself is full of sexual humor that easily translates into many languages. But, to fully appreciate the work, the references to phallic symbols and Athenian culture must also be understood and given the prominence Aristophanes would have expected them to receive. The work carries with it a strong message that war begets destruction and peace brings about



prosperity. Through the use of physical elements Aristophanes showed his audience that they were acting barbarically and irrationally. Only when they came to accept peace would they appear rational and civilized. As the play progresses and the men become more engorged, they gain association with barbaric mythological creatures of ancient Greece. When they finally find relief they find that peace; specifically, Reconciliation, has a restorative effect returning them from a barbaric state into that of normal men.

Fertility was an important aspect of ancient cultures, and to the Athenians in 411 BCE it was even more important. They had abandoned their fertile farming lands for half the year because of the war. They were concerned about having productive harvests. Athenians were also concerned with the loss of life, the loss of sons of Athens, and the continuation of their legitimate offspring. Aristophanes plays upon this fear with his many references to the fertility of men and land in *Lysistrata*. He reminds his audience of the risk they are taking by continuing the war. At the end of the play, he shows them how abundant their yield can be if they would just consent to peace.

Finally, the herm choppers is a reference that is left out of many modern translations of *Lysistrata*. But, it conveys a fear that the Athenian men had of female emasculation and of a seeming unwillingness to acknowledge the real culprits of the crime. Women were highly controlled in ancient Athens and the men seemed to greatly fear their ability to revolt and overthrow the status quo. Aristophanes created a play in which the women do overthrow the men and withhold the one resource they have control over: sex. In doing so, they force the men to meet their demands for peace.

This work has been an enjoyable comedy for over 2,000 years and it will likely continue to be produced for decades and centuries to come. When considering performing it, all artists

should first consider the numerous elements of Athenian society that Aristophanes included in the play to convey a message of peace and reconciliation. These cultural references in *Lysistrata* display Aristophanes' vehement desire for an end of this war and his desire for the audience to understand what they are putting at risk. The cultural and religious significance of phalluses to the ancient Athenians, when applied to various aspects of *Lysistrata*, offers a keen insight into the strength of Aristophanes' argument for an end to the Peloponnesian war. These intentions are pivotal for any director, producer, or actor to understand when taking on this 2,000 year old work. By understanding the cultural significance of the references that Aristophanes makes, a modern production can employ equally prominent icons. Flags, iconic structures, religious symbols all hold strong prominence in contemporary societies. Complementing the phallic references in *Lysistrata* with a suitable modern equivalent will help a 20th century audience fully understand the strength and themes of this work, as Aristophanes intended.

Contemporary directors and actors can make the error of seeing this work a sexually charged peace play. However, it is much more than that. This work strikes at the most ubiquitous symbol in Athens, the phallus. Understanding the significance of this cultural references to Athens can unlock numerous possibilities for directors and actors. Using contemporary conventions and symbols these themes and messages can be conveyed to modern audiences. But, without a solid understanding of the argument the play becomes another peace play with sexual innuendo. Understanding the cultural references and choosing an apt modern equivalent for these references makes this work more powerful, complex, and, hopefully, more enjoyable.

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