Old Comedy and Aristophanes’ Lysistrata
The genre of comedy

- Old comedy is not Aristophanes alone
- A long-lived and VERY rapidly evolving genre

Aristophanes: ONE OF AROUND 60 POETS

- 11 PLAYS OF ARISTOPHANES SURVIVE (and thousands of fragments) out of ca. 800 plays which were composed in the fifth century
- 1% of the total output of the period!
Let us contextualise

- What was the ‘other’ comedy like? How similar or how different was it?
- The rich variety of styles of comedy, especially in the fifth and the fourth centuries BC
- The conventional distinction ‘Old comedy’, ‘Middle comedy’, ‘New comedy’
A convenient, but ultimately false classification:

Old Comedy (5th century comedy) = political comedy with lots of obscenity

Middle Comedy (early 4th century comedy) = mythological burlesque with little interest in politics and only some obscenity

New Comedy (late 4th century comedy) = domestic comedy with little interest in both politics and obscenity
Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449a32-49b9 (Characteristics and early history of comedy):
The composition of plots originally came from Sicily; at Athens, it was Crates (ca 450-440BC) who began to depart from the form of the lampoon and compose general stories and plots.

*Prolegomena on Comedy* III Koster (*On the poets of Old Comedy*; Pherecrates, ca. 440-430)
He was like Crates ... and he too refrained from verbal abuse. He was very successful at introducing new subjects, being inventive with plots.

Σ D. T. p. 18 Hilgard (*Prolegomena on Comedy* XVIIIa p. 71 Koster)
[Old Comedy] was open in its exposure [of the evil individuals] from the start. There were many representatives of Old Comedy, the leading one among whom was Cratinus (450-420BC); he did that, too.

“Platonius,” *On the distinctions among comedies* (*Prolegomena on Comedy* I, pp. 3-6 Koster)
At any rate, Cratinus’ *Odysseuses* contains criticism of no one, but parody of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Such were the plots of Middle Comedy...

Pherecrates *Corianno* fr. 77 (a New comedy-like situation)
On the contrary, it is I who should be the lover;
Your time is past.
So:

- Granted, there are dominant trends in every period of Greek comedy.
- But many styles are to be found in all three periods: political comedy and mythological comedy and domestic comedy, etc etc, are popular styles from the start.
Why is comedy so varied at any one time – and why does it evolve so quickly?

- **COMPETITIVENESS** is a feature which comedy endorses enthusiastically from the start: intense competition between poets for **INNOVATION**

- The relentless **EXPERIMENTATION** on the part of the poets; and the two-way relationship with audiences

- The **SELF-REFLEXIVITY** of comedy: obsession to explore and DEFINE itself (as a genre) and its place in society.
The REFLECTIVENESS of comedy

- ANYTHING, really anything that happens in the Athens of the 5th century BC and (often) in the Greek world more generally is potentially to be found reflected upon in a comedy – and/or, given the state of the evidence, in the thousands of comic fragments; comedy is often the principal contemporary analyst of big historical and cultural changes of the era (but beware of the distorting mirror of comedy!)

- Imagine its value for the discovery of new knowledge for the crowded 5th century
An crucial aspect of comic REFLECTIVENESS:

**SELF-REFLEXIVITY**

- This characteristic is behind much of what happens in the comedies (including *Frogs*), and above all behind their tendency to ENGAGE WITH TRAGEDY.

- The main tool of comedy’s ‘art’ of self-searching and self-definition: the world of tragedy.

- Old Comedy defines itself against a world familiar to the audience. It openly rivals it, imitates it, rejects/endorse it, alludes to it, distorts it and even subverts it. For Aristophanes, this world is almost always tragedy. In the case of other poets, other genres (not only tragedy) are used to this end.

- And yes: tragedy in *Thesmophoriazousae* and *Frogs* is to a large degree about self-definition. Even *Lysistrata*, as we will see, has tragedy’s fingerprints all over.
Example of overt, metapoetic engagement with tragedy: Aristophanes *Acharnians* (425 BC)

- The comic hero Dicaeopolis strives to secure a peace treaty for Athens, which has been tormented by 6 years of continuous war. For this, he has to fight official corruption and public apathy. Exasperated by these obstacles, he is forced to make a private peace for himself alone, while the rest of Attica remains in war. In one scene, he has to deal with his fellow Athenians who oppose him and want the war to go on. He dresses up as the tragic hero Telephos and in a long scene that parodies Euripides’ eponymous play, he tries to persuade them that he is concerned with the good of the city not only as a citizen of Athens but also as an agent of comedy, or, more accurately, trygedy.

- He says:

  “*trygoidia* knows what is right, too”?

- What characteristic of comedy does “too” point to?
Aristophanic comedy’s tendency to compete and define itself against **tragedy**

But **comedy** is ‘voracious’, and takes a lot from other genres, as well:

- E.g. Comedy’s pretence to seriousness and didactic merit; self-righteous indignation and abjection: **iambos**
Comedy and Tragedy: a Synkrisis

- All this self-consciousness and rivalry has its roots in the fact that there is significant common ground between the two genres, which is destabilised by the vast differences between them.

- For example:
  Same occasion, same space

Other similarities?
Comedy and Tragedy: Basic similarities

- Occasion (Dionysia, Lenaia)
- Space (Theatrical space)
- Performative properties: masks, costumes, aulos
- Chorus and actors
- Engagement with political and social context

Shared also with satyr play, the third genre of Greek drama
But consider:

(1) Competitions, poets, number of plays (Dionysia, Lenaia)
And also (2)

- Comedy offers unparalleled spectacle: SIZE AND EXTRAVAGANCE OF CHORUS; vivid & energetic choreography; the parodos
- COSTUMES AND MASKS; “Busi-ness” – or “busy-ness”; readiness to use PROPS (especially outsize ones) and STAGE MACHINERY =>
And also (2)

- SPECIAL EFFECTS: e.g. flying, sailing & boat-scenes, representation of storms and cosmic floods
- MUCH HIGHER PRODUCTION VALUES: it cost DOUBLE to produce a comedy than it did to produce a tragedy
The subject matter of comedy (3)

- Contemporary settings (5th. cent Athens) & fictional plots - contrast tragedy’s sticking to familiar myths
- Usual assumption: tragedy=>myth; comedy=>contemporary material
- Fragmentary comedy provides a different picture in relation to the use of mythological material, e.g. Cratinus’ *Dionysalexandros*
- Experimentation with non-topical subject matter: e.g. *Odysseis* of Cratinus as Homeric parody (as with metre)
The Musical set-pieces of Comedy (4)

- Comedy IS STRUCTURED around elaborate (and peculiarly shaped) musical set-pieces
- Tragedy is structured around ...
- **Parodos** (built up to, long) => **Agon** (central role) => **Parabasis** (long piece by chorus) => **Exodos** (*komos*): all elaborate and very ‘busy’
The language of comedy (5)

Language of tragedy: highly artificial poetic diction but fairly uniform, restrained; important for the consistency which tragedy observes.

Comedy, on the other hand, spans a WIDER RANGE OF STYLES THAN ANY OTHER GENRE, from scatological obscenities to high-flown tragic language, sometimes within the same verse.

The PHYSICALITY OF COMEDY: the tendency to make abstractions PHYSICAL; especially important with comic imagery. Tendency of comedy to PERSONIFY.
Comic freedom to transgress limits and to bend rules (6)

- Laws which govern CAUSALITY, TIME & SPACE, DRAMATIC ILLUSION (generally observed in tragedy) in comedy are susceptible to all kinds of breaches and ruptures.

- The freedom to transgress limits and to bend rules is an essential characteristic of comedy.

- The comic plots suspend laws of physics, logic and naturalism.

- The motivation of Aristophanic characters – comic ‘switching’.

- *When realism, consistency and coherence are observed, this may be a signal that something non-comic’/ paratragic is happening.*
Dramatic illusion in comedy and in tragedy

There is a vast difference in overtness and explicitness of the identified metatheatrical references in tragedy and in comedy; the furthest that tragedy goes is to call attention to the poetic activity, to ritual dimensions of the theatrical event, or to the civic role of spectators; but no character in a tragedy ever acknowledges the audience directly or refers directly to the fact that they are watching a play;

On the contrary, comedies articulate their status as dramatic creations by such means as references to the theatrical cast, costuming, props, acknowledgement of the presence of the audience, the external circumstances of the performance and any other elements which constitute a production.
Aristophanic comedy in context

- Beyond some dates in his career (427-386) and the plays and titles attested for the poet, it is difficult to talk with certainty about biographical details in the case of Aristophanes. Anything that comes from the plays is embedded in a fictional context, so fictionalised. It may correspond to historical reality, depict it accurately, or depart from it significantly, but we cannot be sure.

- What we know:

  **I. Aristophanes was HEIR OF TWO VERY PRODUCTIVE GENERATIONS OF COMIC POETS**

  - When he started his career, comedy had enjoyed 50 years of productions in an official context
  - A thriving period for Athenian theatre, with ever increasing official investment in it. A golden period for comedy.
  - Names of predecessors and early contemporaries:
    - Chionides, Magnes, Ecphantides
    - Cratinus, Crates, Callias, Teleclides, Hermippus
Aristophanic comedy in context

II. COMEDY’S ENGAGEMENT WITH TRAGEDY AS FEATURE OF THE GENRE WELL BEFORE ARISTOPHANES

- Aristophanic comedy defined itself largely through Euripidean tragedy
- Comic poets, however, engaged with tragedy before Aristophanes, especially with Aeschylean tragedy
- Cratinus had defined himself as the ‘Aeschylus of comedy’

WHY?
Aristophanic comedy in context

III. THE VARIETY OF COMIC STYLES

- We often tend to associate old comedy with direct and relentless satire of prominent political individuals by name, uninhibited obscenity, persistent focus on contemporary issues of the Athenian state, such as war and peace, public corruption, new education

- We also notice comedy’s indifference towards realism

- However, the picture for the period is more complex than that; Aristophanic comedy does not necessarily set the rule; there is a large variety of styles, both synchronically and diachronically
Aristophanic comedy in context

Why is it important to know what else was happening:

- Comedy, experimentation and the striking differences within the material, even within Aristophanes (e.g. the ‘antique’ feel of Frogs, a play of 405 BC)
- Important for understanding properly the evolution of the genre (Old-Middle-New)
  - Dominant trends, but also ample possibilities: ‘trendy’ styles, avant-garde styles, and ‘vintage’ styles
- Important for understanding the selection and survival of the 11 Aristophanic plays
To sum up:

- Fifth-century comedy was a mature and incredibly sophisticated genre, certainly well before Aristophanes’ time.
- It owes much of its sophistication, but also its rapid development, to the relentless innovation and experimentation of its poets.
- Comedy developed alongside tragedy; the two genres shared significant common ground, which ‘fuelled’ comedy’s competitiveness.
- Aristophanic comedy defines itself against tragedy almost obsessively, but he was not the first comic playwright who did this.
Some practicalities:
The structure of 5th century comedy

- Tragedy is structured around episodes and stasima. Characters’ exits and entrances often accentuate this structure.

- Comedy is structured around the choral parts peculiar to comedy (parodos – agon – parabasis – exodos) which are often spectacular, lengthy and full of energy.
The structure that fifth-century comedies tend to have

PROLOGUE
The problem / state of affairs. The comic idea.

PARODOS
Chorus enters. Episodic scenes

EPIRRHEMATIC AGON
The comic hero makes the chorus / his/her opponent give in – Epeisodic scenes

PARABASIS
The chorus makes general comments on the theme of the play / or on the poet and his rivals.

EXODOS
‘Marriage’ and revelry

EPISODIC SCENES
With short choral parts
The new state of affairs
Aristophanes’
*Lysistrata*
PROLOGUE (1-254, pp. 267-303)

- Convention of women of Greece
- Plan A (sexual strike)
- Plan B (to seize Acropolis, so to prevent the magistrates from accessing the treasury)
- Oath scene with wine (male stereotype of women)
- Acropolis is seized
PARODOS (254-386, p. 305-319)

- Chorus enters divided in two semi-choruses
- Men’s parodos (254-318): They ascend on the Acropolis rock, carrying wood and fire. They threaten to burn the women inside and to smoke them out
- Women’s parodos (319-351): They carry pitchers of water in defence of the women inside.
- The two semi-choruses fight (352-386) – the struggle of fire and water
PRE-AGONAL SCENE (387-475)

- The Magistrate enters accompanied by his police force (387-423). Timber for the navy’s new oars has been found and it has to be paid.
- The Magistrate and his police force attack to penetrate the door. Lysistrata and other women exit from the interior.
- Women resist and turn into warriors. (424-475) The great fight scene. Archers retreat; women go back into the Acropolis.
Lysistrata explains the reason why the space of the Acropolis has been cut off from men. The women’s frustration at the continuation of the war. The women propose managing the polis just like an oikos (managing *the economics* of the polis just like they manage *the economics* of the oikos).

They dress the Magistrate like a woman and make him weave.

The women explain how their roles will benefit the polis: the extended metaphor of woolworking and weaving for managing the polis.

Lysistrata protests against the injustice at the expense of women – They dress the Magistrate in funerary clothes; Symbolic funeral of the Magistrate – The women return to the interior of the *skene*. 
PARABASIS (614-705, pp. 353-63)

Agon between semi-choruses (and sexual tension)!

[Cf. The convention of parabaseis that the chorus removes (items of) their costumes and speaks out of character about general matters of polis / comedy]

- 616-35: Men take off items of clothing! The semi chorus of old men, as jurors and war veterans, accuse the women for instituting tyranny with help from the Spartans
- 636-57: Women take off items of clothing! They contribute to the polis through religious services (which take care of the land) and by giving birth. Men squander the wealth of the polis with wars.
- 658-81: Men take off more items of clothing! They invite the women to a fight. They liken women to Amazons and to Artemisia.
- 682-705: Women take off more items of clothing. They also invite men to a fight.

Fight is postponed because of Lysistrata’s entry.
EPEISODIC SCENES

The plan suffers a crisis (706-780; pp. 363-373)

- Paratragic tone with bathetic obscenities; the women start deserting their camp; episodic scenes with women-examples emerging from the door (to work with textile or give birth). Lysistrata restores order through an ‘oracle’ and by encouraging women’s resistance.

Choral interlude (781-828; pp. 375-9):

Cinesias and Myrrhine (829-979, pp. 379-403): the plan pays off

Speaking names: *kiniseio* (I want to *kinein* (f**k) – *myrrhine* (female genitals)).

Cinesias who is not allowed to *kinein*

Scene with multiple props carried out from the interior of the *skene* (not Pan’s Grotto).

Climax of scene with ‘kommos’ between Cinesias and Chorus leader

Enter Lacedaemonian Herald and Magistrate with erections (980-1013, pp. 403-7): The plan is working in Sparta. The Spartans’ sexual deprivation, the state of the Magistrate and the invitation for peace.
RECONCILIATION OF SEMI-CHORUSES (1014-1042, pp. 407-11)
The element of care for one another.

Choral interlude (1043-1071, pp. 411-13)
The choruses become one united chorus, and sing about the plentiful provisions of the house and their readiness to give. Closure with comic bathos.

Talks for peace (1072-1188, pp. 413-15)
After the choral interlude, Spartans arrive with painful erections. Athenian delegates arrive in the same state.

Enter Lysistrata – enter Reconciliation, naked personification of desire (for peace).

Lysistrata talks about panhellenic identity, common enemies, and mutual benefits of the past, while the Athenians and the Spartans are lusting after the naked woman / Reconciliation. They both claim the most desirable areas.

EXIT EVERYONE, APART FROM THE CHORUS, INTO THE HOUSE FOR A SYMPOSIUM
Choral interlude (1189-1215, p. 429-31)
Correspondence to the previous – the abundance of the oikos and the readiness to give; closure with comic *bathos*

EXODOS (1216-1321, p.431-41)
The Athenians TRY to exit the oikos for a revelry. The chorus (not slaves) is trying to prevent them from exiting. They have to keep themselves in a constant state of intoxication.

The Spartans exit, revelry, singing and implicit ‘Marriage’ ensue.
Lysistrata and the events of 411 in Athens

From an ancient summary of play, we learn that Lysistrata was produced in 411. From internal elements we deduce that it was produced at the Lenaia (winter), not the Dionysia (spring).
The military situation in 411

- Two years after the Athenian catastrophe in Sicily
- The navy and the economy of Athens have suffered enormous damages.
- Enormous losses of human capital
- Agis B’ and Spartan forces have taken Decelea – the provision of food/resources through Euboea is now cut.
- The Spartans are active in the Hellespont and the Aegean. The Athenian empire is threatened. Many poleis are preparing to rebel. The Persians are encouraged by Alcibiades to intervene.
The military situation in 411

- The Athenians appoint 10 Probouloi (magistrates) in order to deal with the emergency and speed up the procedures.
- With the moment and the navy, Athens manages to rebuild a strong naval power based in Samos which will control the rebelling tendencies of the ‘allied’ poleis in the Aegean Sea.
- Towards the end of 412, Athens is still in a difficult position, but gradually regains its confidence and essentially inverts its disadvantage.
- It seems that it will either regain power and win the war – or at least achieve a favourable settlement.
The situation in 411 in relation to the *Lysistrata*

The ‘official’ position, represented by men

- The play’s focus on the money in the Acropolis may suggest that the Athenians had regained some confidence and were ready to vote in favour of the war.

- The references to the illustrious past suggests a confidence on the part of Athens. Perhaps new successes with the power in Samos (vv. 313); References to the allies might suggest a regain of confidence (vv. 108, 944, 1176-82)

- Is victory possible?
ANTHROPOLOGICAL CATEGORIES AND COMMON ASSOCIATIONS IN MYTHIC IMAGINATION

FEMALE
PRODUCTIVITY
COMMUNALITY
PEACE
LIQUID / WATER

MALE
DESTRUCTION
POSSESSION
WAR
FIRE
The parodos (254-386) and the symbolism of fire and water

MEN’S LEADER
Let’s hurry to the Acropolis, Philurgus, full speed ahead, so we can lay these logs in a circle around all the women who have instigated or abetted this business. Let’s erect a single pyre and incinerate them with our own hands, all of them on a single vote, starting with Lycon’s wife! 25

This pair of logs is utterly crushing my shoulder!
But I’ve got to soldier on,
and keep my fire alight.
It mustn’t go out on me before I’ve reached my goal.
Ouch, ugh! The smoke!
How terribly, Lord Heracles, this smoke
jumped from the bucket and attacked me!
It bit both my eyes like a rabid bitch!
And as for this fire, it’s Lemnian
in every possible way; ²⁹ otherwise
it wouldn’t have bitten into my bloodshot eyes that way!
Hurry forth to the citadel,
run to the Goddess’ rescue!
When would be a better time than now to help her,
Laches?
Ouch, ugh! The smoke!
In Homer and Aeschylus, war is very much associated with destruction of life, both human and natural. War activities and their consequences are associated with distorted agricultural and natural imagery.
FEMALE – LIQUID/WATER – GROWTH/PRODUCTIVITY

The liquid element – in contrast to the fire – is the element that supports growth and production, the element that guarantees life.

Water, the juices of the plants and nature more generally, other liquids which are associated with growth and life (milk, honey) are evoked in contexts of fertility, such as songs, invocations to deities.

Who is the ‘liquid’ god of ancient Greece;
**FEMALE – LIQUID/WATER – GROWTH/PRODUCTIVITY**

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*DIONYSUS, THE MASULINE & FEMININE GOD, GOD OF WINE, THE POWERS OF NATURE, THE CHANGE OF FORMS, FLOWING POETIC INSPIRATION ETC.*
MAGISTRATE

So the women’s profligacy has flared up again, has it, the tomtoms, the steady chants of “Sabazios,” this worship of Adonis on the rooftops? I heard it all once before while sitting in Assembly. Demostratus (bad luck to him!) was moving that we send an armada to Sicily, while his wife was dancing and yelling “Poor young Adonis!” Then Demostratus moved that we sign up some Zakynthian infantry, but his wife up on the roof was getting drunk and crying “Beat your breast for Adonis!” But he just went on
MALE AND THE FIRE OF DESIRE

Enter SPARTAN DELEGATES, with Slaves.

CHORUS LEADER
Look, here come delegates from Sparta, trailing long beards and wearing something like a pig pen around their thighs. Gentlemen of Sparta: first, my greetings! Then tell us, how are you faring?

SPARTAN DELEGATE
What’s the use of wasting lots of words? It’s plain to see how we’re faring. (they open their cloaks)

CHORUS LEADER
Wow! This condition has grown terribly tense, and looks to be inflamed worse than before.

SPARTAN DELEGATE
Unspeakable! What can one say? Just let someone come and make peace for us on any terms he likes.

Enter ATHENIAN DELEGATES.

CHORUS LEADER
Look, now I see these native sons holding their cloaks away from their bellies too, like men wrestling! Looks like a bad case of prickly heat. 96
Enter the women’s chorus on the run; its members are nicely dressed and carry water pitchers on their heads.

Women’s leader
I think I can see sparks and smoke, fellow women, as if a fire were ablaze. We must hurry all the faster!

Women’s chorus
Fly, fly, Nicodice, 32
before Calyce and Critylla go up
in flames, fanned all around
by nasty winds
and old men who mean death!
I’m filled with dread: am I too late to help?
I’ve just come from the well with my pitcher;
I could hardly fill it in the dim light of dawn,
in the throng and crash and clatter of pots,
fighting the elbows of housemaids
and branded slaves; zealously
I hoisted it onto my head, and to aid the women,
my fellow citizens faced with fire,
here I am with water!
MEN’S LEADER
Why are you here with water, you witch?

WOMEN’S LEADER
And why are you here with fire, you tomb? To burn yourself up?

MEN’S LEADER
Me, I’m here to build a pyre and burn up your friends.

WOMEN’S LEADER
And I’ve come to put it out with this.

MEN’S LEADER
You put out my fire?

WOMEN’S LEADER
That’s what you soon will see.

MEN’S LEADER
I think I might barbecue you on the spot with this torch of mine.

WOMEN’S LEADER
Got any soap with you? I’ll give you a bath.

MEN’S LEADER
You give me a bath, you rotten crone?

WOMEN’S LEADER
A bath fit for a bridegroom!

MEN’S LEADER
Listen to her insolence!
What is the identity of the oikos in the very beginning of the play, and why?
The *oikos* acquires an(other) identity

**LYSISTRATA**

It’s just as I was telling you before: the women have occupied the Acropolis and the Goddess’ temple. Now, Lampito: you be off and see to your end of the bargain, but leave these women here with us as hostages.

*Exit LAMPITO.*

Meanwhile, let’s go inside with the other women on the Acropolis and help bar the gates.

**CALONICE**

But don’t you think the men will quickly launch a concerted counterattack on us?

**LYSISTRATA**

I’m not worried about them. They can’t come against us with enough threats or fire to get these gates open, except on the terms we’ve agreed on.

**CALONICE**

No they can’t, so help me Aphrodite! Otherwise we women wouldn’t deserve to be called rascals you can’t win a fight with!

_All exit into the central door of the scene building, which henceforth represents the Acropolis gates. Enter MEN’S CHORUS._

vv. 240-53, pp. 303
all this, when I, a Magistrate, have lined up timber for oars and now come to get the necessary funds, and find myself standing at the gates, locked out by women! But it’s no use just standing here. *(to the two Slaves)* Bring the crowbars; I’ll put a stop to their arrogance. What are you gaping at, you sorry fool? And where are you staring? I said crowbar, not winebar! 43 Come on, put those crowbars under the gates and start jimmying on that side; I’ll do the jimmying over here.

**LYSISTRATA**

*(emerging from the gates)*: Don’t be doing any jimmying; I’m coming out on my very own. Why do you need crowbars? It’s not crowbars you need, but rather brains and sense.
The polysemous space of the *oikos*

What is extremely significant about the interior? Why do men need to violate the door and get inside?
The Acropolis as a symbol of aggression and imperialism

- The Acropolis treasury
- The temple of Athena Polias contains the treasury of the Athenian Empire.
- A symbol of the imperialist Athenian power
- The temporary effect on women’s attitude; aggression
LYSISTRATA
By the Two Goddesses, you’ll soon discover that we also have four squadrons of fully armed combat women, waiting inside!

MAGISTRATE
Scythians, twist their arms behind their backs!

LYSISTRATA
Women of the reserve, come out double-time!

Enter Old Women.
Forward, you spawn of the marketplace, you soup and vegetable mongers! Forward, you landladies, you hawkers of garlic and bread! Tackle them! Hit them! Smash them! Call them names, the nastier the better! That’s enough! Withdraw! Don’t strip the bodies!

Policemen run away howling; Old Women reenter the Acropolis.

MAGISTRATE
How awful! What a rout of my archer troops!
LYSISTRATA
You’re asking me that? We’ll manage it for you.

MAGISTRATE
You’ll manage the money?

LYSISTRATA
What’s so strange about that? Don’t we manage the household finances for you already?

MAGISTRATE
That’s different.

LYSISTRATA
How so?

MAGISTRATE
These are war funds!

LYSISTRATA
But there shouldn’t even be a war.
A persistent theme in ancient drama is how it is possible to balance the interests of oikos and polis; how is it possible to serve one without damaging the other.

*Medea*: polis ideology damages oikos

*The Oresteia*: oikos ideology damages community

**Oikos and polis**
In *Lysistrata*, the men’s abuse of the polis wealth for war destroys the lives of young men and wastes the youth of unmarried women.

**MAGISTRATE**
Isn’t it awful how these women go like this with their sticks, and like that with their bobbins, when they share none of the war’s burdens?

**LYSISTRATA**
None? You monster! We bear more than our fair share, in the first place by giving birth to sons and sending them off to the army—

**MAGISTRATE**
Enough of that! Don’t open old wounds.

**LYSISTRATA**
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.
Solution: to turn the polis into an oikos.

MAGISTRATE
So how will you women be able to put a stop to such a complicated international mess, and sort it all out?

LYSISTRATA
Very easily.

MAGISTRATE
How? Show me.

LYSISTRATA
*(taking the sewing basket from the Magistrate and using its contents to illustrate)* It’s rather like a ball of yarn when it gets tangled up. We hold it this way, and carefully wind out the strands on our spindles, now this way, now that way. That’s how we’ll wind up this war, if we’re allowed: unsnarling it by sending embassies, now this way, now that way.
Lysistrata

Imagine the polis as a fleece just shorn. First, put it in a bath and wash out all the sheep dung; spread it on a bed and beat out the riff-raff with a stick, and pluck out the thorns; as for those who clump and knot themselves together to snag government positions, card them out and pluck off their heads. Next, card the wool into a sewing basket of unity and goodwill, mixing in everyone. The resident aliens and any other foreigner who’s your friend, and anyone who owes money to the people’s treasury, mix them in there too. And oh yes, the cities that are colonies of this land: imagine them as flocks of your fleece, each one lying apart from the others. So take all these flocks and bring them together here, joining them all and making one big bobbin. And from this weave a fine new cloak for the people.
Comedy, tragedy, oikos and polis.

The scene of Myrrhene and Cinesias effect the turning of the space of the polis into an *oikos* – as loads of household objects are carried outside.

The whole polis becomes a public oikos – so long as the women stop their destructive war.

At the end, when everyone enters *oikos-Acropolis-polis*, the skene acquires the identity of a private household, which offers a symposium not just for the entire polis, but for the entire community of Greeks.
The FEMALE BODY and reconciliation

In comedy, female personifications are used to represent abstract objects of desire, even when there is no sexual content. (Comedy does not do abstract, anyway!)

In Aristophanes’ *Peace*, Peace, Harvest and Festival are presented as desirable women who arouse the Athenians sexually; in Aristophanes’ *Birds*, the Kingship is given as bride to Peisthetairos so that he can sleep with her.

In *Lysistrata*, Reconciliation also arouses desire – but here the effect is one of ambivalence.
Male possessiveless and desire for exploitation ≠ Female communality
(at the same time as Lysistrata in vain talks about Panhellenic spirit)

LYSISTRATA
So why, after so many fine favors done, are you fighting instead of calling a halt to your misbehavior? Why not make peace? Come on, what’s in the way?

SPARTAN DELEGATE
We’re ready, if they’re ready to return to us this abutment. 103

LYSISTRATA
What abutment, sir?
SPARTAN DELEGATE
Pylos here, that for a long time we've been coveting and feeling out.

FIRST ATHENIAN DELEGATE
So help me Poseidon, that you won't get!

LYSISTRATA
Give it to them, good sir.

FIRST ATHENIAN DELEGATE
Then who will we be able to harrass?

LYSISTRATA
Just ask for some other place in return for that one.

FIRST ATHENIAN DELEGATE
Well, let's see now. First of all give us Echinos here and the Malian Gulf behind it and both Legs.

SPARTAN DELEGATE
By the Twain Gods, we're not handing over everything, dear fellow!

LYSISTRATA
Let it go: don't be squabbling about a pair of legs.
How optimistic is the ending of the play?

- Despite the creation of peace, the men are focused on exclusive possession and enjoyment of Reconciliation’s (body) parts.
- The men exit the house with torches in their hands, and the chorus tries to stop them.
- Does the chorus take part in the revelry at the end? If not, what might this suggest?
Lysistrata as character
Lysistrata as character and gender

- Different from other women in her indifference towards sex. Has almost a male gaze towards Lampito. Does not take part in the sexual strike.
- Her ‘life’ and concerns seem to be different from everyone else’s.
- Her level of dignity is quite unusual for comedy
- She is addressed by name by the men; recognised as ‘equal’
- Her use of public speech and her emphasis on planning are ideologically perceived as masculine characteristics.
Lysistrata as character

- There is a reference to the priestess of Athena Polias Lysimache.
- She has 'priestly' roles, such as overseeing the oath (parody of the *Seven Against Thebes* scene).
- She resembles the goddess Athena, the par excellence 'masculine' goddess of the Greek pantheon, who is connected with war and wisdom.
- How should we interpret the fact that the plan which saves Greece is invented and implemented by the only woman who resembles a man in so many ways?
Lysistrata as character

- On a positive side, Lysistrata’s masculine characteristics do not belong to the model of aggression, greed and destructiveness, that the play associates with men – but to a more idealised conception of masculinity, the kind of masculinity that is embodied by Athena.

- Perhaps a positive transformation of masculine /polis, with enhancement by positive elements of the feminine / oikos?
Readings

- Robson, J. ‘Aristophanes, Gender and Sexuality’ in Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Aristophanic Comedy, Leiden: 44-66