# Lysistrata

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ARISTOPHANES

We know little of Aristophanes' biography, and most of what we do know comes from his plays themselves. He was born in Kydathenaion, a deme or subdivision of Classical Athens, some fifty years after the Athenian statesman Cleisthenes (b. 570 BC) implemented sweeping democratic reform in the city-state. His father, a landowning citizen of Athens, was named Philippus. Aristophanes produced his first play, *The Banqueters*, in 427 BC, and would go on to write some forty plays over the course of his career in comedy, some of which we have in their entirety, many of which we have only in fragments. His plays were staged during Athenian drama competitions like those held during the City Dionysia and Lenaia, where they garnered prizes and fame for their robust, high-spirited poetry and incisive satirical wit. The most famous of Aristophanes' surviving plays include *The Clouds* (completed in 417 BC), *The Birds* (414 BC), *Lysistrata* (411 BC), and *The Frogs* (405 BC). Aristophanes' satire—scathing but born of a deep love for Athens—targets, among other things, warmongering politicians like the demagogue Cleon, who zealously supported the Peloponnesian War effort (see *The Knights*), intellectual charlatanism, and the blustery pomposity of the tragic spirit. His most famous victim is perhaps the great philosopher Socrates, whom Aristophanes presents in *The Clouds* as a myopic dope, a mere sophist, and an obnoxious corrupter of Athenian values. Indeed, Socrates's student Plato would later blame Aristophanes for contributing to Socrates' trial, conviction, and execution at the hands of the Athenian state in 399 BC. Aristophanes is remembered today as the greatest comic playwright of antiquity, and many readers would argue that he is the greatest comic playwright of all time, surpassing even Shakespeare and Moliere.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Aristophanes lived and wrote during a time of grandiose greed and political ambition in Classical Athens, when populism and demagoguery held sway. It was also a time of paranoia both foreign and domestic, violently punctuated by political purges and mass executions. Perhaps the major historical event to transpire in the Greek world during Aristophanes' lifetime was the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC)—an event that Aristophanes fiercely condemned, along with its architects and supporters, throughout his dramatic career. Athens was waging bloody, costly warfare against the Peloponnesian League led by the Greek city-state of Sparta; and, as part of that conflict, Athens had also recently suffered a fatal disaster during the Sicilian Expedition (415-413 BC), a failed military intervention in which some two hundred ships and five thousand Athenian soldiers were destroyed in one fell swoop. Aristophanes reserved his most brutal satire for the demagogue he held most accountable for the mess, the Athenian general Cleon, whom he condemned as a rabid warmonger. Athens went on to surrender to Sparta in 404 BC, and their political supremacy in Greece was forever broken.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Aristophanes was the high prince of the Greek Old Comedy, a genre distinctive for its scathing political and cultural satire as well as for its exuberant sexual and scatological obscenity. In contrast to the Greek tragedians like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—all of whom were alive when he was—Aristophanes generally treats not mythical but topical subjects in his plays, and his plots are not grimly tight but rather explosively carnival-like, stuffed with high fantasy and wit. The more modern inheritors of the Old Comedy include Rabelais in his *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (published between c. 1532 and 1564), Cervantes in his *Don Quixote* (published between 1605 and 1615), and Jonathan Swift in his *Tale of a Tub* (published in 1704) and *Gulliver's Travels* (first published in 1726). It should be noted, however, that *Lysistrata* represents, in part, Aristophanes' turn away from some of the conventions of Old Comedy. For example, instead of having one Chorus as was traditional, the play has a Chorus divided into two quarrelling factions: old men versus old women. This, of course, is in keeping with the play's dramatic scenario.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Lysistrata*
- **When Written:** Circa 411 BC
- **Where Written:** Athens, Greece
- **When Published:** *Lysistrata* was first performed in 411 BC, probably during the Lenaia, an annual Athenian festival and drama competition.
- **Literary Period:** Classical
- **Genre:** Comedy
- **Setting:** Classical Athens
- **Climax:** Lysistrata's sex strike against the Peloponnesian War threatens to unravel when the Greek women become increasingly desirous for sex
- **Antagonist:** The Athenian men's political corruption, greed, and ambition; the Peloponnesian War

### EXTRA CREDIT

**A New Leaf.** *Lysistrata* is uncharacteristic of Aristophanes' work, which tends to be more outrageously overflowing. Douglass Parker explains: "The play's technical excellences are unquestionable: tight formal unity, economy of movement, realism in characterizations, range of feeling. They are also rather un-Aristophanic excellences, and the specialist who prefers earlier, comparatively messy pieces may perhaps be forgiven."

**Adaptations and Realizations.** Many stage and film directors have adapted *Lysistrata*, most recently Spike Lee, whose film *Chi-Raq* (2015) transposes Aristophanes' plot to inner-city Chicago. Instead of a sex strike against Greek-on-Greek warfare, Lee presents a sex-strike against gang-on-gang gun violence; and instead of Greek verse, his characters speak in the rhymes and cadences of rap music. But the plot of *Lysistrata* has also leapt off the stage and screen and into the real world. For example, in 2002, the Liberian Mass Action for Peace organized a sex strike in Liberia that ultimately contributed to the peaceful resolution of the Second Liberian Civil War.

## PLOT SUMMARY

*Lysistrata* begins with the Athenian woman Lysistrata pacing the streets of Athens, waiting for the Greek women she has summoned to arrive. Lysistrata's neighbor Kleonike enters and tries to calm her, but Lysistrata denigrates the women of Greece as weak and lazy, and she announces that she has on *her* mind nothing less than a plot to end the Peloponnesian War between Athens and the Peloponnesian League (led by Sparta).

The other women arrive soon enough, including the Athenian Myrrhine, the brawny Spartan woman Lampito, and the Peloponnesian women Ismenia and the Corinthian girl. After the women greet and inspect one another, Lysistrata asks them what they'd be willing to do to bring about an end to the Peloponnesian War: we'd be willing to *die*, they say. Lysistrata then reveals that her plot simply requires that the women abstain from sex. This, she hopes, will force their men to bring about peace. Kleonike and Myrrhine at first refuse to participate and begin to walk away—they prefer war to sexless lives—but once Lampito voices her support for the sex strike, all of the women gradually come to support it. Lysistrata proceeds to reveal the second part of her plot: not only will the women abstain from sex, they'll also seize **the Acropolis** to prevent the Athenian men from accessing their war treasury. The women of Greece proceed to swear an Oath of abstinence over a cup of wine. Meanwhile the Chorus of Old Women, on Lysistrata's orders, take the Acropolis. Lysistrata orders Lampito to stir up a sex strike back in Sparta, and Lampito goes off to oblige. Lysistrata and her women then hurry over to the Acropolis, and the door shuts behind them.

A decrepit, misogynistic Chorus of Old Men slowly enters with torches and pots of fire to smoke and burn the women out of the Acropolis. While they trudge uphill, however, griping all the way, their fires begin to smoke and go out. Somehow the men make it to the Acropolis door, only for the spryer Chorus of Old Women to meet them there with pitchers of water. The Male Koryphaios, or leader of the Chorus of Old Men, asks for volunteers to pulverize the women for their backtalk, but no one comes forward. Insults and threats are exchanged, and the old women, led by the Female Koryphaios, eventually douse the old men with freezing water—an utter defeat.

A Commissioner of Public Safety then enters with a squad of police made up of four Scythian archers; he plans on putting an end to the "MORAL CHAOS" created by the women (he also plans on getting some money from the treasury to buy oars for the Athenian navy). He orders his officers to pry open the Acropolis gate with crowbars. Lysistrata enters, and the Commissioner orders a policeman to arrest Lysistrata, but she comically repels him a vicious jab of her spindle. Kleonike, Myrrhine, and Ismenia similarly repel the three remaining officers. The Commissioner asks Lysistrata why she's doing all this: she responds that the women are sick and tired of their husbands' staggering political incompetence, and that money is the root of this evil. When the Commissioner becomes outraged, Lysistrata and her cohorts dress him up as a woman and tell him to go home. The women declare that they'll handle Athens just as though it were yarn: they'll clean it, rid it of parasites, and weave it into a suitable city-state. After all, Lysistrata says, the women have just as much a stake in affairs of state as the men do, because their husbands and sons are the ones fighting, and because their own quality of life is diminished in times of war. These arguments only convince the Commissioner to urge the Athenian men to fight all the more vigorously, so Lysistrata and her women comically attack him till he staggers offstage. The women themselves then reenter the Acropolis, while down below the Male Koryphaios wrestles, unsuccessfully, with his female counterpart, who succeeds in throwing him off balance.

Time passes, several days at least. A distraught Lysistrata reemerges from the Acropolis: the women, she says, really want to get laid, and they're forsaking the sex strike as a result. She quickly reads a prophecy to them, which the women understand to mean that they must maintain solidarity, and they troop back inside the Acropolis. More trouble is on the horizon, however: Kinesias, Myrrhine's husband, is approaching along with a slave and the couple's baby boy. He has a large erection and is in considerable pain. Lysistrata flatters his physical endowment, and Myrrhine descends to him to comfort her dirty, unfed child. Kinesias tells her how empty the home feels without her, how much he loves her—and then he tries to seduce his wife, sending his baby home with the slave. Myrrhine acts as though she'll give in to him, but she keeps

prolonging the moment of consummation. At last, just when it seems that sex is nigh, Myrrhine asks her husband if he's going to support the truce. When Kinesias gives her a noncommittal response, Myrrhine runs off for good. Accompanied by the Male Koryphaios, Kinesias tragically laments the throbbing pain of his erection, then exits.

A Spartan herald enters, as does the Commissioner, and both conceal erections under their cloaks. The herald announces that Lampito has sown disorder in the Peloponnesian League through her sex strike, driving the men mad with painful lust. The Commissioner orders the herald to have a Commission sent to Athens empowered to conclude a truce. Both men exit hurriedly, and, in the meantime, the Female Koryphaios dresses her naked male counterpart, thereby softening his hard heart.

A delegation of Spartans and Athenians soon enter. With Lysistrata's help, and motivated by the sight of the naked body of Peace, here personified as a beautiful girl, they quickly draw up the terms of peace. Throughout, Lysistrata pontificates about the brotherhood of the Greeks, and about their common enemy in the Persians. Once peace is struck, the women throw a merry feast for all. Everyone gets drunk, and the wives return to their husbands. "Let's not make the same mistakes again," Lysistrata cautions, before inviting the Spartans to sing a final song. They oblige her by singing a lively ode to dancing, beautiful girls, and Spartan rivers, and the wisdom goddess **Athena**. Everyone exits, dancing and singing.

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Lysistrata** – A grand, intelligent, alluring woman, Lysistrata organizes a sex strike not only in her hometown of Athens but in Sparta as well, all in the hope that the men of Greece might peacefully end the bloody, costly Peloponnesian War. She is something of an idealist, and very witty. Scholars see in Lysistrata traces of two important Athenian figures: the priestess of **Athena** and the courtesan (mistress or upper-class prostitute). Lysistrata is not married, is seemingly less susceptible to erotic desire than the other Athenian women, and wisely works for Peace by masterfully manipulating the men around her. Indeed, Lysistrata practically directs the play of which she's part: the Athenian women obey her orders, and the men can't help but react to her plot in the way she wants them to. By the play's end, of course, the men who earlier denounced Lysistrata as a rebel celebrate her as the most excellent of women, a true peace-bringer.

**Kleonike** – The fun-loving Athenian woman Kleonike is the first to respond to her neighbor Lysistrata's summons at the beginning of the play. However, Kleonike conforms more to Athenian gender stereotypes than her neighbor does. She loves soft, fancy garments, and she would rather walk through fire than abstain from having sex. She even slanders her own sex as being superficial, lazy, and unwise. That being said, once she joins Lysistrata's cause Kleonike proves herself to be sharp-tongued and fierce: she serves as the women's spokesperson when they swear their Oath to abstain from sex, and she wields a chamber pot in the fight against the Athenian police.

**Myrrhine** – The conventional Athenian woman Myrrhine arrives guiltily late to Lysistrata's summons at the beginning of the play, but once there she promises to do anything to end the war, even to cut herself in half like a mackerel—but then she immediately cries out "*On with the War!*" when asked to abstain from sex. Lysistrata soon persuades Myrrhine to take part in the sex strike, however, and indeed Myrrhine goes on to support the cause by fiercely wielding a blazing lamp against the Athenian police. Toward the end of the play, the fate of Lysistrata's plot practically rests in Myrrhine's hands, as she takes the most active role yet in seducing her husband Kinesias and then denying him satisfaction.

**The Chorus of Old Women** – In Greek drama, a chorus is a homogenous, synchronized group of actors that typically comments on the action of the play and models the ideal audience response in speech, song, and dance; their leader and spokesperson is called a "Koryphaios." It was usually traditional to only have one Chorus in a play, but in *Lysistrata* there are two, and both Choruses directly participate in the action of the play. The fierce, no-nonsense Chorus of Old Women seizes **the Acropolis**—site of the Athenian war treasury—as part of Lysistrata's plan to end the Peloponnesian War. Using pitchers of water, the Chorus then repels the Chorus of Old Men as the latter attempts to burn and smoke the women out.

**The Chorus of Old Men** – The Chorus of Old Men is composed of weak, shaky, doddering old men who are portrayed as comically inept and impotent. They grouchily complain about women and are furious when the Chorus of Old Women seizes **the Acropolis**. The old men, staunch supporters of the war, haul their phallic torches and firepots up to the Acropolis to burn and smoke Lysistrata and her women out, but the women's pitchers of freezing water soon repel them.

**Commissioner of Public Safety** – When the Chorus of Old Men fails to secure **the Acropolis**, the Commissioner of Public Safety comes on the scene to bring Lysistrata and her women to justice. The embodiment of patriarchal authority, law, and order in Athens, the Commissioner orders his squad of four police (or rather, Scythian archers, the Athenian equivalent of our police) to arrest the rebels, but Lysistrata, Kleonike, Myrrhine, and Ismenia fiercely drive them off with household goods. Although the Commissioner is bullheaded and loathes what he calls the "MORAL CHAOS" brought on by the women, he is also intent on understanding the women's motives. Lysistrata tries to explain, but when the Commissioner becomes outraged by what he thinks is female presumptuousness, she and her cohorts shut him up by forcibly

dressing him up like a woman. Later, the Commissioner takes even worse: when he urges a reinvigoration of the war effort, the women attack him until he staggers offstage. By the play's end, however, even the Commissioner gets a little drunk and only plays at being an enforcer of the rules.

**Kinesias** – Kinesias is an Athenian citizen, Myrrhine's husband, and the father of her baby boy. He approaches **the Acropolis** afflicted by a nasty attack of love (read: a painful erection) and attempts to seduce his wife, only to be led on and then abandoned. Toward the end of the play, Kinesias is part of the Athenian delegation that, guided by Lysistrata, brokers a peace with the Spartans.

**Lampito** – A brawny representative Spartan, Lampito is the first woman to support Lysistrata's plot for peace. While the Athenian women seize **the Acropolis**, Lampito returns to Sparta to organize a sex strike of her own. Per an Athenian ethnic stereotype—and like all the Spartan extras in the play—Lampito comes off as something of an unsophisticated, half-witted bumpkin who speaks a degenerate dialect of Greek.

**Ismenia** – Ismenia is a pretty Boiotian girl who comes from an aristocratic family in Thebes, an ally of Sparta in the Peloponnesian League. She accompanies Lampito to Lysistrata's summons, and remains in Athens as a warmly welcome hostage until Athens and Sparta make peace. She never speaks, but she does repel a policeman by brandishing "a huge pair of pincers."

**The Corinthian girl** – Like Ismenia, the huge Corinthian girl accompanies Lampito to Lysistrata's summons, and remains in Athens as a warmly welcome hostage until Athens and Sparta make peace. The Corinthian girl is distinguished by the fact that she hails from a powerful family in Corinth, and even more so by her comically enlarged rear end.

**Peace** – Peace is the personification of peace, and in the play she takes the form of a beautiful naked girl whom both the Athenian and Spartan men lust after. Peace accompanies Lysistrata outside **the Acropolis** while the Greeks put a stop to the Peloponnesian War, and she is ogled all the while by Kinesias and a Spartan ambassador.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**The Female Koryphaios** – The leader and spokesperson of the Chorus of Old Women. The spry Female Koryphaios gives and takes jabs and kicks from her male counterpart during the conflict at **the Acropolis**, but at the end of the play, the two Choruses are reconciled and unite as one.

**The Male Koryphaios** –The leader and spokesperson of the Chorus of Old Men, the Male Koryphaios is an especially foul self-proclaimed misogynist, but by the end of the play he breaks down and weeps at all the good the women have done him in brokering Peace.

**The Spartan Herald** – Toward the end of the play, the Spartan herald enters, bearing a message of Peace from his people. He also bears a painful erection that he desperately but unsuccessfully attempts to hide under his cloak.

# THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

## WAR AND PEACE

Aristophanes' great comedy *Lysistrata* was first performed in the Greek city-state of Classical Athens in 411 BC, when Athenian supremacy in Greece was collapsing. For two decades or so, Athens had been engaged in bloody, costly warfare against the Peloponnesian League (led by the Greek city-state of Sparta), in what is now known as the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC). Moreover, as part of that conflict, Athens had also recently suffered a fatal disaster during the Sicilian Expedition (415-413 BC), a failed military intervention in which some two hundred ships and five thousand Athenian soldiers were destroyed in one fell swoop.

These events form the crucial historical backdrop of *Lysistrata*—indeed, the inciting action of the play, spearheaded by the titular heroine, is a resolution on the part of the women of Athens and Sparta to withhold sex from their men until they bring about a peaceful end to the Peloponnesian War. Lysistrata herself identifies the cause of the war to be nothing more than political corruption, greed, and ambition. The men of Athens, entangled in their folly and paranoia, disagree. "The War Effort needs [the Treasury's] money!" a Commissioner of Public Safety insists—to which Lysistrata wittily retorts, "Who needs the War Effort?" After all, the Peloponnesian War brought with it not public safety but rather pain and suffering for Athens, from military disaster abroad to ruptures in the fabric of daily life at home, over which Lysistrata and her fellow women grieve: dead sons, a lack of marriageable men, and women growing out of their "prime" without the chance to marry.

So it is that Lysistrata and the women of both Athens and Sparta are willing to go to great extremes in suing for peace. This is not to say that *Lysistrata* is an anti-war play, however, as many readers like to think it is. Rather, the play takes a stand against war when it is waged for bad reasons, against "staggering incompetence" when it comes to the handling of affairs of state, and against specifically Greek-on-Greek warfare. Both the Athenians and Spartans were Greek, after all, and allies in the Greco-Persian Wars that ended only some

twenty years before the Peloponnesian War began. (It should be added here, however, that Aristophanes, always playing for laughs, nonetheless does little to improve the Athenian perception of the Spartans in his play, as he represents them as unsophisticated, half-witted bumpkins who speak a degenerate dialect of Greek.) By the conclusion of the play, the women's sex strike so hotly bothers their men that the Greeks do in fact make peace: "Dance to the gods' glory, and thank them for the happy ending," Lysistrata calls out in her final speech. Historical Athens, though, did not make such a happy ending for itself: driven to it by besiegement, starvation, and disease, the Athenians surrendered to the Spartans in 404 BC, and their supremacy in Greece was forever broken.

## GENDER ROLES

Though Athens was a democracy, male citizens held all of the political power, and women enjoyed relatively few rights and privileges. Athenian women could not hold political office, for example, or participate in democratic elections, votes, or debates, nor could they serve on juries or bring lawsuits. Furthermore, the economic activity of Athenian women was also limited (although they did budget the household accounts, as Lysistrata says), and so was their freedom of movement. Their education and responsibilities centered on domesticities like weaving cloth and raising children. The most powerful women in Athens tended to be the priestesses of the tutelary wisdom goddess **Athena**, as well as the *hetairai*, courtesans or prostitutes who were of a lower social status than citizens' wives but who were compensated with more privileges.

We must have some understanding of these cultural features in Classical Athens to understand what Aristophanes is up to in *Lysistrata*, because it is a play that both reflects and plays with the gender roles of its time and place. On the one hand, the women in the play, other than Lysistrata herself, tend to be stereotypes: superficial, flighty, and coy. Even they themselves are skeptical about their power to effect peace in Greece: women are lazy, they say, unwise, and talented only in glamorously painting their faces and primping. The Athenian men, both in and out of the play, perhaps, would agree: women are unfit for rational discourse, they say, deceptive, sly, and immoral as they are. The men of Athens, however, are stubborn, paranoid, and so entangled in their mismanagement of the state that they have lost sight of basic human needs.

Consequently, the grand, intelligent, and alluring Lysistrata—whose character, scholars argue, Aristophanes modeled after both a contemporary priestess of Athena named Lysimache as well as the figure of the courtesan—arrives at the conclusion that a reversal of gender roles is necessary if Athens is to be at peace. So it is that she and her women storm **the Acropolis**—a great citadel that served as the political and religious center of Athens, and also home to the Athenian war treasury—thereby usurping, albeit temporarily, their men's political power. The women justify their loving plot with unanswerable simplicity: the Female Koryphaios announces, "I hold stock in Athens—stock I paid for in sons." In place of political madness, the women propose common sense. Indeed, Lysistrata suggests that women's domestic work cultivates in them a common sense that men tend to problematically lack, particularly in the world of the play, where the male characters are presented as hopelessly inept. This point is eloquently made when Lysistrata compares Athens to "fleece, recently shorn," and gives her solution to political problems by extending this metaphor of domestic work. As fleece needs to be scrubbed, beaten so as to rid it of vermin, combed of its lumps and knots and snarls, and expertly woven, so too does Athens need to be cleansed of filth, rid of incompetent parasites, and politically reunified if it is to properly fit the Athenian spirit. This is homespun political sanity at its best.

Still, Aristophanes is no feminist, and *Lysistrata* is no proto-feminist tract. The women take control only to restore their men to sanity, after which, the play suggests, the men will and should once again pilot the ship of state. To complicate the matter even more, only men performed on the Classical Athenian stage, a fact which Aristophanes milks by giving some of his female characters masculine qualities, like the brawny Spartan Lampito as well as the take-charge and severe Lysistrata herself. Moreover, scholars are not in agreement as to whether or not women in Classical Athens would have attended dramatic festivals at all—*Lysistrata* may well be a play written by a man, performed by men, and performed for men alone.

## SEXUALITY AND THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES

While Athens wages war against enemies offstage, *Lysistrata* presents warfare onstage, too: the battle of the sexes. In a parody of warfare, the women of Greece besiege their men with abstinence, and they storm **the Acropolis** and lock it down as if with a chastity belt. They fight not to the death, but to the peace, and they fight not with swords and bows and spears, but with pitchers of water, spindles, lamps, and other domestic tools. When the Chorus of Old Men attempts to retake the Acropolis by means of virile fire, the Chorus of Old Women douses fire with water—a metaphor for subduing warlike rapacity with chastity, anger with clear-headedness. The women, lacking political power, must weaponize their sexuality, and they do so not out of mad political ambition but out of a commonsense desire to restore peace.

Love, at last, necessarily gets the better of war, as is evinced by the comedy's single most iconic stage image. After the women's sex strike has gone on for so long, the Greek men, Athenians and Spartans alike, find themselves between a rock and a hard

place. They refuse to make peace, but in this they also condemn themselves to waddling around the stage with painful erections, desperately but unsuccessfully attempting to hide them under their cloaks. Men aren't the only casualties of the battle of the sexes either. The Athenian woman Kleonike, for one, is extremely reluctant to give up sex, even if it means the continuation of the war. "I'm willing to walk through fire barefoot," she says, "but not to give up SEX—there's nothing like it!" Another woman stuffs **Athena**'s sacred helmet in her clothing so that she appears pregnant, the better to sneak away from the Acropolis and rendezvous with her lover.

As such ridiculous stage images and antics suggest, Athenians "invested sex with little transcendental significance," according to the esteemed Aristophanes scholar and translator Douglass Parker. Nor is the point of *Lysistrata* that the love of a good woman can save men from themselves, or that free love brings peace into the world. Rather, the play envisions sex as a basic human need, and, when sex is rooted in love and marriage, the gratification of sexual desire is deeply pleasing. Not so with the needless pain and suffering brought on by the Peloponnesian War. This is all to say that *Lysistrata* is a somewhat hedonistic play: whenever you can, it suggests, fulfill your needs, pursue pleasure in accordance with civic virtue, and avoid pain. When Peace personified makes an appearance toward the play's resolution, it should come as no surprise at this point that the form she takes, as we learn in a stage direction, is that of "a beautiful girl without a stitch on," that is, naked. The Greek men ogle Peace and her "purtiest behind," as one Spartan has it, and their ardor "to plow a few furrows" and "to work a few loads of fertilizer in" quickly burns away all warlike thoughts. The men of Greece seem to have forgotten about pleasure in their greed, ambition, and paranoia—but Lysistrata and the women of Greece remind them that a pleasureless state is not worth living in.

### REBELLION, PATRIOTISM, AND THE POLITICAL POWER OF COMEDY

Lysistrata, during the exposition of her comedy, announces that she intends to put into motion a plot "that really deserves the name of monstrous," a full-blown rebellion. And that is exactly what she does, rebelling both against patriarchal authority and against the disastrous policies of Athens itself. In addition to being the stage for the battle of the sexes, then, **the Acropolis** is also a symbol for the mind of the Athenian body politic, as it were—the center where all political decisions are made. The Greek women conclude that, under the control of men, this mind has gone mad, and they refuse to be obedient any longer to madness. No more will they tolerate and endure the men's incompetent manhandling of affairs of state, "masking our worry with a nervous laugh," as Lysistrata says; no more will they endure the needless death of their sons in war.

The Greek men, characteristically, misunderstand the women's rebellion altogether, and this misunderstanding reflects how their idea of patriotism has been perverted. The Commissioner of Public Safety reasons rather badly that what is elsewhere referred to as the "MORAL CHAOS" let loose upon Athens arises from husbands being too incautious with their wives. We shouldn't have left our wives alone with goldsmiths and cobblers, he argues, because the ensuing "hanky-panky [is what] what we have thank for today's / Utter Anarchy." Later, the men reason, again badly, that the women's rebellion is really sponsored by the Spartans in a bid "to commandeer the City's cash." Such lame attributions of motive speak to the Athenian men's greed and self-absorption, as well as to their blindness as to the domestic effects of needless warfare. Their cardinal error is to think that such pride and warmongering is in the best interests of the city-state.

This brings us to the great irony of Aristophanes' comedy: the women are more in line with the wellbeing and spirit of Athens than their male counterparts are, not so much rebels against as *defenders of* the city-state. When the mind of Athens is mad, rebellion alone can restore it to sanity. Indeed, that was in part the purpose of Aristophanes' comedy in general: to bring the Athenians to their senses through satire, mockery, and purifying laughter. As the playwright himself suggests, his vocation involves saying much that is amusing, but also much that is serious. His is a comedy with a sense of civic duty. *Lysistrata*, of course, is no political tract; Aristophanes is not arguing that women should overtake the City. The play is rather a fantasy, lovingly intended to disrupt, and to liberate Athens from, its self-destructive downward spiral. In the spirit of Lysistrata herself, Aristophanes' comedy is not an act of rebellion, but rather a reminder of Athenian values and a satire about how far the people have drifted from what they once rightly held dear. That historical Athens did not make full use of Aristophanes' insights does not diminish his comedy's power to make us laugh, thoughtfully, even now.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### ATHENA AND THE ACROPOLIS

Athena was the tutelary wisdom goddess of Athens, and she was worshiped chiefly at her temple in the Acropolis, a great citadel that served as the political and religious center of Athens, home to the Athenian war treasury. In *Lysistrata*, Athena is a shadowy but important presence. She symbolizes the wisdom that the Athenian men, in their greed and ambition, have forgotten. Relatedly, the Acropolis symbolizes political control over Athens; it is the

mind of the Athenian body politic, where Athena's wisdom *should* reign. Under the control of the men, however, this mind has gone mad, and so the women under Lysistrata's leadership storm the Acropolis to restore sanity, wisdom, and peace. Over the course of the play, Aristophanes cleverly modulates this symbol so that the Acropolis, fiercely besieged by the men and even more fiercely defended by the women, also comes to be associated with the female anatomy. When wisdom is forgotten, a reminder of our basic needs might be just what we need to bring us to our senses. By the end of the play, Athens and Sparta make peace, Athena as the goddess of wisdom once again rules in the Acropolis, and sex and wisdom are unified into what Douglass Parker calls "the civilizing force of love."

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the New American Library edition of *Four Plays by Aristophanes* published in 1984.

### Lines 1 – 253 Quotes

Announce a debauch in honor of Bacchos,
a spree for Pan, some footling fertility fieldday,
and traffic stops—the streets are absolutely clogged
with frantic female banging on tambourines. No urging
for an orgy!
But *today*—there's not one woman here.

**Related Characters:** Lysistrata (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 1-4

**Explanation and Analysis**

Lysistrata has entered the stage alone and is pacing anxiously. She laments the fact that the women she has called on are not yet there, claiming that if she had suggested hosting a party or an orgy then everyone would have arrived without hesitation. This humorous opening to the play establishes a world dominated by hedonism, in which women enjoy debauchery but are reluctant to participate in serious matters. In many ways, this presents a rather sexist view of women (one that would have been standard in Greek culture at the time), suggesting that they are frivolous, lustful, and flighty. It also hints at the fact that the course of action Lysistrata is proposing––a coordinated sex strike––is not going to be easy for the women. This creates comic suspense in advance of the arrival of the other female characters.

I'm positively ashamed to be a woman—a member
of a sex which can't even live up to male slanders!
To hear our husbands talk, we're *sly*: deceitful,
always plotting, monsters of intrigue…

**Related Characters:** Lysistrata (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 11-12

**Explanation and Analysis**

Lysistrata has been waiting impatiently for other women to join her to discuss the sex strike. Eventually, her neighbor Kleonike appears, and urges her to calm down. Lysistrata replies that she's "ashamed to be a woman," because women can't even live up to all the negative stereotypes that men use to describe them. From the examples Lysistrata gives, it is clear that she is fully implicating herself in this critique. As she points out, men accuse women of being "sly, deceitful, always plotting"––even as she herself is secretly plotting a sex strike designed to undermine the men. This suggests that negative stereotypes about women can sometimes be accurate.

On the other hand, Lysistrata's reference to these negative stereotypes is humorously ironic. She implies that it would be better if all women lived up to these "slanders," rather than just being frivolous and lazy. This in turn suggests that men do misrepresent women––but do so by overestimating their capabilities! Note that, although Lysistrata is complaining about women's flightiness at this point, she plans to strategically utilize people's low expectations of women's political commitment in order to achieve her aim of ending the war.

Us? Be practical. Wisdom for women? There's nothing
cosmic about cosmetics—and Glamor is our only talent.
All we can do is *sit*, primped and painted,
made up and dressed up.

**Related Characters:** Kleonike (speaker), Lysistrata

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 41-43

**Explanation and Analysis**

While they wait for the other women, Kleonike has asked Lysistrata to describe her plan. Lysistrata has explained that she wants to unite all Greek women into bringing about the end of the Peloponnesian War, thereby saving Greece from itself. Kleonike responds cynically; she clearly thinks Lysistrata's plan is ridiculous. In this passage, Kleonike explains that women will never be able to act wisely (or even effectively), because "glamor is our only talent." Clearly, Lysistrata and Kleonike have very different attitudes to gender roles (and the possibility of subverting them).

While Lysistrata laments the stereotypes women are held against and believes it is possible for women to transcend them, Kleonike seems happy to accept the idea that all women can do is be "made up and dressed up." Note that the examples she gives are in the passive tense, implying that even this "primping" is something that is done *to* women, rather than something they choose to do themselves. Obviously, this does not bode well for political action. At the same time, Lysistrata plans to use these stereotypes to her advantage; by withholding sex, the women will not have to actively do anything, but rather look enticing while denying their husbands intimacy.

> We can force our husbands to negotiate Peace,
> Ladies, by exercising steadfast Self-Control—
> By Total Abstinence…
> By Total Abstinence…
> from SEX!

**Related Characters:** Lysistrata (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 119-125

**Explanation and Analysis**

The other women have at last arrived, and are eager to know why Lysistrata has summoned them together. Lysistrata has announced that she hopes that, together, they will put an end to the war, and the women enthusiastically say they will give up anything to do this. In this passage, Lysistrata announces that she plans to force their husbands "to negotiate Peace" by collectively abstaining from sex. The way she repeats "by total abstinence" builds dramatic and comic suspense for what she will reveal. When Lysistrata announces "from SEX!" this is humorous both in its frivolity and––eventually––in how extremely negatively the women react to it. Indeed, Lysistrata's words play with the audience's expectations that sex is not a "serious" issue like war; however, the play suggests that it is in fact arguably more powerful.

> I'm willing to walk through fire barefoot.
> But not
> to give up SEX—there's nothing like it, Lysistrata!

**Related Characters:** Kleonike (speaker), Lysistrata

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 134-136

**Explanation and Analysis**

The women have pleaded to know why Lysistrata has brought them together, and Lysistrata has told them that she plans for them to collectively bring about peace. Although the women initially pledge to do anything for this cause––including die––when Lysistrata eventually reveals that she is asking them to give up sex, the women are appalled. In this comic passage, Kleonike emphasizes that she would "walk through fire barefoot" rather than give up sex. Once again, the women are shown to be shallow, frivolous, and weak-willed. Kleonike's insistence that "there's nothing like it" suggests that she is unable to look beyond her immediate pleasure in order to serve the greater good of ending the war. The women's reaction also coheres with the play's crude humor, in which sex takes on an outsized significance, while also being presented as something universal and essentially human (i.e., not particularly "sacred" or idealized).

## Lines 254 – 705 Quotes

> What a catastrophe—
> *MATRIARCHY!*
> They've brought Athene's statue to heel,
> they've put the Akropolis under a seal,
> they've copped the whole damned commonweal…
> What is there left for them to steal?

**Related Characters:** The Chorus of Old Men (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 258-265

**Explanation and Analysis**

The women have agreed to Lysistrata's plan of abstaining from sex; at the same time, the Chorus of Old Women has seized the Acropolis, thereby putting the other half of Lysistrata's plan into action. Meanwhile, the Chorus of Old Men has entered, complaining about their wives and how the group of women has managed to take over the Acropolis. The Chorus calls matriarchy "a catastrophe," which is ironic, considering Lysistrata's whole plan was designed to avoid the catastrophe caused by the rule of men. The words "they've put the Acropolis under a seal" highlight the connection between the Old Women sealing off the Acropolis and the younger women sealing off their bodies from their husbands. At this stage, however, the Old Men remain ignorant about the plan for abstinence, which builds comic suspense.

Preserve me, Athene, from gazing on any
maiden or maid auto-da fé'd.
Cover with grace these redeemers of Greece
from battles, insanity, Man's inhumanity.
Gold-browed goddess, hither to aid us!
Fight as our ally, join in our sally
against pyromaniac slaughter—
Haul Water!

**Related Characters:** The Chorus of Old Women (speaker), The Chorus of Old Men

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 335-349

**Explanation and Analysis**

The Chorus of Old Men have been slowly and shakily making their way to the Acropolis, revealing their bumbling incompetence while at the same time praying to Athena to grant them victory over the women. The Chorus of Old Men have resolved to burn down the gates of the Acropolis, but at the same time, the Chorus of Old Women are preparing buckets of water to put the fires out. They, too, pray to Athena to grant them victory over "battles, insanity, Man's inhumanity." The contrast between the two Choruses reveal the men to be brutish and self-interested, hoping to use force to gain back "supremacy" over the women. The women, meanwhile, are cunning, pre-empting the men's attack with fire by preparing buckets of water.

Furthermore, the women are also shown to be motivated beyond self-interest. Rather than wanting to secure "matriarchy" for its own sake, the women seek an end to the destruction caused by war and "slaughter." In this sense, the women are shown to be wiser, more caring, and even more patriotic leaders than the men.

Koryphaios of Women:
I'll crop your lungs and reap your bowels, bite by bite,
and leave no balls on the body for other bitches to
gnaw.

Koryphaios of Men:
[*Retreating hurriedly.*]
Can't beat Euripides for insight. And I quote:
*No creature's found*
*so lost to shame as Woman.*
Talk about realist playwrights!

**Related Characters:** The Female Koryphaios, The Male Koryphaios (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 368-370

**Explanation and Analysis**

The Chorus of Old Men have marched toward the Acropolis, carrying torches with which they plan to burn down the gates. The Chorus of Old Women, meanwhile, have noticed the torches and prepared water to dump on the men. When the two choruses finally confront each other, they exchange threats. In this passage, the Chorus of Old Women threaten to bite the men, leaving "no balls on the body for other bitches to gnaw." The Chorus of Old Men, alarmed, call for an immediate retreat, quoting Euripides' statement that "No creature's found / so lost to shame as Woman." This meta-theatrical reference is humorous, and draws attention to Aristophanes' presentation of gender and how it fits into the wider tradition of Greek drama.

Indeed, although the Chorus of Men point out that, like other Greek playwrights, Aristophanes shows women to be "lost to shame," note the unconventional way in which women are here shown to be more fearless, aggressive, and resolute than the men. This passage suggests that women have a unique understanding of men's vulnerabilities, which the Chorus of Old Women is not afraid to exploit. Indeed, the women's violent threats indicate that at this point the Peloponnesian War has been overshadowed by another war: the battle of the sexes.

Commissioner:
I DO NOT WANT TO BE SAVED, DAMMIT!

Lysistrata:
All the more reason.
It's not only Sparta: now we'll have to save you from you.

**Related Characters:** Lysistrata, Commissioner of Public Safety (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 522-523

**Explanation and Analysis**

The Commissioner of Public Safety has entered, and blames the women not only for creating the current chaotic situation but also for creating an atmosphere in which war could flourish in the first place. The gates of the Acropolis have burst open, revealing Lysistrata and the other women; the Commissioner has tried to have them arrested, but is unsuccessful. Lysistrata demands that women be put in charge of the city's budget, and offers to save the men from themselves, to which the Commissioner cries out that he does not want to be saved. This humorous exchange plays on the unexpected power dynamic between the Commissioner and Lysistrata; while we might expect the Commissioner to be in firm, authoritative control, it is in fact Lysistrata who is commanding the conversation, and the Commissioner who is acting like a petulant child.

Although Lysistrata's comment that she wants to "save you from you" is comic, it reflects a longstanding paradox within the cultural history of gender relations. As the play shows, women have historically been stereotyped as foolish, flighty, and incapable of making serious decisions. At the same time, they have also been characterized as more sensitive, caring, and nonviolent than men. Thus, although women generally have not been trusted with political responsibility, there is an extent to which they have been tasked with keeping men in check, and limiting the destruction that can result from violence and war. Although Lysistrata's words seem over-the-top, there is a historical precedent for her argument.

A tally of [these girls'] talents
convinces me they're giants
of excellence. To commence:
there's Beauty, Duty, Prudence, Science,
Self-Reliance, Compliance, Defiance,
and Love of Athens in balanced alliance
with Common Sense!

**Related Characters:** The Chorus of Old Women (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 541-548

**Explanation and Analysis**

The Commissioner has expressed skepticism over the fact that the women are even interested in war; Lysistrata responds by explaining that the women are tired of men's incompetence. She and the other women then dress the Commissioner up as a woman, and the Chorus of Old Women joyfully announce their virtues: "Beauty, Duty, Prudence, Science, Self-Reliance, Compliance, Defiance and Love of Athens." The fact that the virtues rhyme adds a sense of silliness to the situation, but at the same time, there does seem to be truth in the chorus's words, as throughout the play, the women have demonstrated many of these virtues. On the other hand, several of the virtues are contradictory––such as compliance and defiance––which could be taken to suggest that the women's boasts are largely meaningless.

It's rather like yarn. When a hank's in a tangle,
we lift it—*so*—and work out the snarls by winding it up
on spindles, now this way, now that way.
That's how we'll wind up the War.

**Related Characters:** Lysistrata (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 584-591

**Explanation and Analysis**

The women have dressed the Commissioner up as a woman, and explained to him their plan of action. They intend to withdraw the army currently occupying Athens, telling stories to illustrate why the military does not belong in the city center. In this passage, Lysistrata explains that Greece is "rather like yarn" that has become tangled, and that the women plan to "work out the snarls." This is a significant moment in the play, in which Lysistrata applies "feminine" logic to the traditionally masculine domains of politics, war, and the city-state. To some extent, her words imply that she is naïve, as her analogy suggests that she has a rather simplistic understanding of war. On the other hand, the women's success thus far indicates that they are perhaps not asnaïve as they first appear, and suggests that the men could use a healthy dose of "feminine" logic to cure them of their current madness of war and greed.

I admit to being a woman—
but don't sell my contribution short on that account.
It's better than the present panic. And my word is as
good as my bond, because I hold stock in Athens—
stock I paid for in sons.

**Related Characters:** The Female Koryphaios (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 648-650

**Explanation and Analysis**

The women have argued with the Commissioner about the war, before wrapping him in thread and emptying their chamber pots on him; he eventually retreats. Meanwhile, the Male Koryphaios has encouraged the men to confront the women, and hits the Female Koryphaios in the jaw. In response, the Female Koryphaios announces defiantly that she admits to "being a woman," and claims that she holds stock in Athens, "stock I paid for in sons." This is an important and surprisingly moving moment in the play. With neither money of their own nor political power, women were not thought to be invested––both literally and metaphorically––in the happenings of the city-state. However, as the Female Koryphaios shows, women were in fact fundamentally implicated in the matters of politics and war on a very deep level.

Note that even while making this rather feminist statement, however, the Female Koryphaios still frames her point in terms of women's relationship to men. The experience of the women themselves counts less than the fact that their sons died (or risked death) in battle. This logic therefore still upholds men as more important than women.

## Lines 706 – 979 Quotes

I've lost my grip on the girls—they're mad for men!
But sly—they slip out in droves.

**Related Characters:** Lysistrata (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 714-715

**Explanation and Analysis**

The women are losing their resolve, and have been inventing suspicious excuses to leave the Acropolis. Lysistrata announces with exasperation that the women are "mad for men" and are sneakily escaping "in droves." After the women's early triumph, their vulnerability is revealed: they, like the men they are "fighting," are not able to resist the temptation of sex. This is a surprising twist, given the pride of the women and the negative treatment they have received from the men. Indeed, it is somewhat paradoxical that the women should be driven "mad" by desire for the men who have been trying so desperately to thwart, undermine, and even physically attack them. On the other hand, throughout the play sexual desire is presented as a comically all-powerful force that is almost impossible to resist.

Melanion is our ideal:
his loathing makes us free.
Our dearest aim is the gemlike flame
of his misogyny.

**Related Characters:** The Chorus of Old Men (speaker), The Chorus of Old Women

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 790-792

**Explanation and Analysis**

The women have confessed that they are pining for the men and wish to leave the Acropolis; Lysistrata, however, has urged them not to give in by telling them an analogy about Zeus. The women reluctantly agree. Meanwhile, the two choruses have assembled, and the Chorus of Old Men sings about a man called Melanion, who abstained from women permanently. The chorus claims that this is their "ideal," and that they look up to "the gemlike flame of his misogyny." This is a highly silly moment, in which the Chorus of Old Men seem desperate to find a way of dealing with the fact that the women have abandoned them, and thus unconvincingly pretend that they have no interest in women in the first place.

On the other hand, the Chorus of Old Men is also pointing to a more serious phenomenon. Throughout history, women have been portrayed as sly seducers who distract men from more important matters such as war, politics, or religion. The ability to resist the temptation of women is thus often framed as a noble masculine virtue, the sign of dignity, discipline, and self-restraint. Although it is unusual to portray this in terms of "loathing" for women, there is nonetheless a long tradition of men believing that such resistance to women will indeed set them free.

> Your duty is clear.
> Pop him on the griddle, twist
> the spit, braize him, baste him, stew him in his own
> juice, do him to a turn. Sear him with kisses,
> coyness, caresses, *everything*—
> but stop where Our Oath
> begins.

**Related Characters:** Lysistrata (speaker), Kinesias, Myrrhine

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 841-845

**Explanation and Analysis**

The Chorus of Old Men have been taunting the Chorus of Old Women; one man attempts to kiss a woman, and when this fails he kicks her, only to reveal his pubic hair. Lysistrata, meanwhile, has seen Myrrhine's husband, Kinesias, approaching. He looks mad with desire, and in this passage Lysistrata instructs Myrrhine to excite and tease Kinesias, but to "stop where Our Oath begins"--meaning to stop just at the point before they have sex. Lysistrata's words evoke a grotesque, almost sadistic punishment. She reduces Kinesias to a piece of meat, urging Myrrhine to "baste him, stew him in his own juice." Indeed, her words seem to contradict the stereotype that women are less violent (or objectifying of the opposite sex) than men.

> —Life is a husk. She left our home, and happiness
> went with her. Now pain is the tenant. Oh, to enter
> that wifeless house, to sense that awful emptiness,
> to eat that tasteless, joyless food—it makes
> it hard, I tell you.

**Related Characters:** Kinesias (speaker), Myrrhine

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 865-869

**Explanation and Analysis**

Myrrhine's husband, Kinesias, has approached the Acropolis. Lysistrata has asked who he is, before flattering him by telling him that he is famous among the women of Athens, who circulate rumors about his penis. Lysistrata allows him to speak to Myrrhine, and in this passage Kinesias laments how terrible their household is without his wife around. On one level, Kinesias' speech might provoke sympathy--he seems to miss his wife terribly, and even brings along their young son to stress how pitiable they are without Myrrhine around. On the other hand, the audience knows that Kinesias is in a kind of sexual frenzy, and thus it is difficult to take him at his word. His love for Myrrhine seems rather instrumental--he loves her mostly for the services she provides to him.

## Lines 980 – 1323 Quotes

> The most unnerving work of nature,
> the pride of applied immorality,
> is the common female human.
> No fire can match, no beast can best her.
> O Unsurmountability,
> thy name—worse luck—is Woman.

**Related Characters:** The Male Koryphaios (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 1014-1015

**Explanation and Analysis**

The Spartan Herald has revealed that the men of the Peloponnesian League have been driven mad with lust. Hearing this, the Commissioner has then ordered the Spartan Herald to call for a truce between Spartans and Athenians. Meanwhile, the Male Koryphaios describes women as "the most unnerving work of nature." Yet even while the Koryphaios spitefully curses women, he can't help doing so in terms of their strength and stubbornness: "No fire can match, no beast can best her. O Unsurmountability." This shows that although the women have aroused enormous anger and resentment from the men, they have simultaneously established themselves as fierce, influential actors whom the men should be careful not to underestimate. Indeed, the fact that women are asserting agency at all is enough to provoke rage from the men.

I can't dispute the truth or logic of the pithy old proverb:
*Life with women is hell.*
*Life without women is hell, too.*
And so we conclude a truce with you, on the following terms:
in future, a mutual moratorium on mischief in all its forms.

**Related Characters:** The Male Koryphaios (speaker), The Female Koryphaios

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 1038-1041

**Explanation and Analysis**

The Female Koryphaios has attempted to befriend the Male Koryphaios, who initially rejects her. However, after the Female Koryphaios continues to show kindness, the Male relents, and eventually the two choruses agree to a truce. The terms of this truce are typically cynical and humorous; the Male Koryphaios declares, "Life with women is hell. Life without women is hell, too." His words emphasize the fact that the women have achieved a kind of absolute control over the men. They also illustrate the complicated nature of sexual desire, highlighting the way in which it is possible to be mad with lust for someone you despise. The fact that the Male Koryphaios quotes a "pithy old proverb" (and the fact that we are still reading this play thousands of years later) also suggests that the battle of the sexes is as ancient as humanity itself.

Now, dear, first get those Spartans and bring them to me…
Be a lady, be proper, do just what you'd do at home:
if hands are refused, conduct them by the handle…
And now a hand to the Athenians—it doesn't matter
where; accept any offer—and bring *them* over.

**Related Characters:** Lysistrata (speaker), Peace

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 1116-1124

**Explanation and Analysis**

A group of Spartans have entered, all of whom have painful, exaggerated erections and are desperate to strike a peace deal. Everyone present has agreed that this is the best course of action, but that Lysistrata must be present when it happens. Lysistrata arrives, accompanied by Peace, who is symbolized as a beautiful, naked young woman. In this passage, Lysistrata instructs Peace to "be a lady, be proper" and help the peace treaty be signed. Lysistrata's behavior in this moment shows how much power and authority she has gained as a result of her actions. Meanwhile, her words emphasize the way in which Peace is feminized, represented as both a "proper lady" and a sexual object (who can conduct the men by the "handle" if they won't offer her a hand). Indeed, the instructions Lysistrata gives humorously resonate with the responsibilities of women within the domestic sphere.

Each man stand by his wife, each wife
by her husband. Dance to the gods' glory, and thank
them for the happy ending. And, from now on, please be
careful. Let's not make the same mistakes again.

**Related Characters:** Lysistrata (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 1274-1178

**Explanation and Analysis**

The peace treaty has been signed; the war is over, the two choruses have fused into one, and all the characters have

held a feast to celebrate. The Spartans dance and sing, honoring Spartan heroes as well as the hunting goddess, Artemis. After this is done, Lysistrata returns both the Athenian and Spartan wives to their respective husbands, encouraging them to dance and be happy, as well as to be careful to "not make the same mistakes again." Although Lysistrata herself is shown to have had a singular, positive effect on the state of Greece, overall it does not seem likely that her plea will be fulfilled (and indeed, in real life the Athenian leaders didn't heed Aristophanes' advice, and the war continued on to Athens' ultimate ruin).

There are several moments that hint at the idea that the battle of the sexes is ancient, cyclical, and will never be resolved. Furthermore, even though some characters reveal themselves to be wiser or kinder than we may have initially assumed, overall the play presents a farcical view of human nature––the men are largely aggressive and lustful, while the women are shallow, fickle, and sly. Although the end of *Lysistrata* takes the form of an unambiguously happy resolution, the rest of the play indicates that the "truce" between the sexes (or the city-states) may not last very long.

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### LINES 1 – 253

The play opens on a street in Athens, with **the Acropolis** visible in the background. It is early morning. Lysistrata is alone, pacing in furious impatience, waiting for the women she has summoned to arrive. She complains that they would come right away if it was for a party in honor of the wine god Bacchus or for some debauchery, but today "there's not one woman here."

*Lysistrata is all about fighting the patriarchy, but it isn't exactly a proto-feminist text. The play even opens with the female characters (with the exception of Lysistrata herself) all conforming to negative female stereotypes: laziness, flightiness, and lustfulness.*

Lysistrata's neighbor Kleonike enters. "Don't look so barbarous, baby," she says. Lysistrata responds that she's ashamed to be a woman—women can't even live up to male slanders, she says. Husbands say their wives are sly, deceitful, always plotting, yet here Lysistrata is attempting to devise a "monstrous" plot, and the women, she thinks, are all sleeping at home. Kleonike attempts to soothe Lysistrata by reminding her of how hard women have it—pleasing their husbands, taking care of their babies—but Lysistrata thinks all this is trivial compared to her plot.

*Lysistrata's distinction from the other women in the play is emphasized by her impatience with them here. She is both less domestic (less stereotypically feminine, basically) and more politically active. Kleonike, in contrast, more closely conforms to Athenian gender stereotypes. Here Lysistrata also brings up the idea that her plan is something "monstrous"—a full-scale rebellion against the status quo via unconventional means.*

Kleonike asks what Lysistrata's plot is all about. Lysistrata responds that the hope and salvation of Greece lies with the women. "Now *there's* a last resort," retorts Kleonike. Lysistrata elaborates: it is up to the woman of Greece to decide whether the Greek city-state of Athens pursues peace or annihilation in its war with Sparta (i.e. the Peloponnesian War). Kleonike thinks this sounds fun: annihilation of every last Boiotian, she cries. (The Boiotians were allies of Sparta in the war.) On second thought, she says, peace is best—how else would Athenians get their hands on the delicious eels Boiotia is famous for?

*In this opening scene, both Lysistrata and Kleonike make jokes that denigrate their own gender—the women in the play must unite before they can be taken seriously. Kleonike demonstrates a lack of seriousness herself when she flip-flops on the question of war or peace. As the women's plot unfolds, however, she becomes increasingly dedicated to the latter.*

Lysistrata insists that she wants to bring together all the Greek women to form an alliance and save the States of Greece. "Be practical," Kleonike advises. Women are unwise, she says, and are talented only in glamorously painting their faces and primping. Indeed, she gets so carried away by the very thought of primping that she begins to indulgently list the clothes she loves: "saffron rappers," "exquisite negligees," and so on. Lysistrata thinks that such sexy garments, along with rouge and perfume, are precisely the way to salvation for Greece. But where are the other women? Kleonike assures her that authentic Athenians do everything late, and that the delegations of women from out of town are late on account of their long trips.

*Kleonike consistently underestimates the power of women, but Lysistrata understands better than she does how powerful the manipulation of basic human needs, like sex, can be. She sees, as Kleonike does not, that even something so superficially trivial as a negligee is really an expression of profound human desire, and that such desire goes even deeper than the greed and paranoia that possess the Athenian men at war. Kleonike's joke about Athenian lateness is probably a barb about how Athens should have ended the war* much *earlier.*

At last, other women enter from the right and left, even some ragged rural women. Lysistrata's friend Myrrhine also enters guiltily. Soon after, the brawny Spartan woman Lampito enters, along with a pretty Boiotian girl named Ismenia and a huge, big-butted Corinthian girl. Lysistrata welcomes all, and showers the out-of-towners with compliments. Lampito demonstrates the dance that keeps her so fit, and Kleonike praises the beauty of her bosoms. Lampito says, in her "bumpkin" Spartan dialect, that she feels "like a heifer come fair-time" to be so inspected and praised. Lysistrata and Kleonike go on to inspect the aristocratic Ismenia of Thebes, and the Corinthian girl, who comes from an important family.

*The women who answer Lysistrata's summons are representative of all the women of Greece. They come from diverse backgrounds and from both sides of the Peloponnesian War. The foreigners, like Lampito and the Corinthian girl, conform to Athenian ethnic stereotypes. (Even in a play about making peace with Sparta, Aristophanes can't help making fun of Spartans.) Aristophanes' comedy is not malicious however; rather, it emphasizes ethnic or national differences only to show how trivial these are when it comes to solidarity in the name of basic human needs, like peace and love.*

The women want to know, at last, why Lysistrata has summoned them. Lysistrata asks if the women would like their men to come home from war—they would. Lysistrata then asks if she'd have their support in a scheme to end the war. The women enthusiastically pledge money and hard work to the cause. Myrrhine says that she's "ready to split myself right up the middle like a mackerel, and give you half!" Lysistrata then reveals her plot: the women can force their husbands to negotiate peace through "Total Abstinence." From what? the women ask. They'd be willing to *die* for peace.

*Lysistrata is tactful: she knows that she cannot ask at once for the women to abstain from sex, but instead builds up to it, highlighting the huge potential benefits of effecting an end to the war. This also further adds to the suspense, as Aristophanes holds off on giving up the comic conceit of his play.*

To force a peaceful end to the Peloponnesian War, says Lysistrata, the women need only abstain totally—from sex. At once, the women turn away and begin to gloomily walk off, in tears. "*On with the War!*" cry Kleonike and Myrrhine. They're willing to walk through fire barefoot, "but not to give up SEX—there nothing like it!" Lysistrata curses her sex, saying that it's so weak in willpower, and is material only for tragedy. The tragic formula of going to bed with a god and getting rid of the baby sums women up, Lysistrata says disgustedly.

*Aristophanes has his women make outrageous pledges to the cause of peace so that the punch line—the women at first refusing to abstain from sex, which seems so much more trivial than* dying, *anyway—hits all the harder. The fact that the women are so reluctant to abstain from sex also shows just how effective a political tool this basic human desire can be. It's also worth noting that the frankness about sexuality that lies at the heart of the play's central conceit gives us more of an idea of Athenian society at the time—sex was out in the open, an important part of life but not anything especially sacred.*

Lampito, however, is on Lysistrata's side, and the other women gradually come around to the idea of a sex strike. They need only present themselves to the men at their most seductive—made-up, dressed in "those filmy tunics that set off everything we *have*"—and then refuse to sleep with their hot and bothered men. Lysistrata thinks the men will conclude a treaty rather quickly. Kleonike worries that the men will leave the women, or force them to have sex, or beat them. Lysistrata tells her to resist nastily: "A married man wants harmony—cooperation, not rape," she says. The women are persuaded, and they approve the sex strike.

*It is significant that Lampito is Lysistrata's first supporter, because she is also the only Spartan among the women; by siding with an Athenian, Lampito suggests that the human cost of the war is intolerable on both sides. Kleonike's very serious concerns here remind us that this play is, first and foremost, a fantasy about peace, not at all a political tract of proposal. To enjoy and be enriched by the play, we must suspend our disbelief about the plausibility of the male reaction to the plot.*

Lysistrata proceeds to reveal the second part of her plot: to prevent the Athenian men from continuing the war effort, the Chorus of Old Women will seize **the Acropolis**, where the war treasury is located, on Lysistrata's command.

*The Acropolis is the seat of political power in the play; whoever controls the Acropolis controls Athenian policy.*

The women feel like they can't possibly lose, and they decide to bind their agreement with the Oath. Instead of swearing on a shield and animal sacrifice, however—deciding this is too warlike—they swear on a huge black cup filled with fragrant wine. The women surround the cup and place their right hand on it, and Lysistrata leads Kleonike through the Oath as a spokesperson for all the women. To uphold the Oath, the women must "withhold all rights of access or entrance" from any man, even while they fire up their husbands' desire by presenting themselves at their most glamorous and seductive. Led by Lysistrata, the women then take their turns drinking from the cup.

*Men of war might swear on the shield, but the women want peace, so the cup of wine is therefore the more suitable symbol for their oath: an image of pleasure, leisure, and peace. The cup of wine here foreshadows the merry, drunken celebration of peace that concludes the play.*

Lampito then hears a "ruckus" in the distance—the Chorus of Old Women have taken **the Acropolis**, citadel of the wise goddess **Athena**! Lysistrata tells Lampito to return to Sparta to work on bringing about peace on her end. She also demands that the other women in Lampito's group be left in Athens as hostages. Lampito exits. Lysistrata then orders the women to hurry inside the Acropolis to help the others. Kleonike worries that the men will send reinforcements against them, but Lysistrata is confident that the Gates will hold. The women hurry off, and the door to the Acropolis shuts behind them.

*Lysistrata is canny enough to know that peace requires the will of both Athens and Sparta, hence Lampito's mission. She is also canny enough to keep Ismenia and the Corinthian girl as hostages to ensure that the peace process stays on track. Lysistrata may be something of an idealist in wanting to end the war, but she is also practical and no-nonsense. The Gates of the Acropolis here become an image of the female anatomy—closed off and inaccessible to any male violations.*

## LINES 254 – 705

The decrepit Chorus of Old Men, led by their especially decrepit Male Koryphaios (leader of the chorus), enters shakily and slowly in two groups. They carry vinewood torches and pots containing fire, which is always in danger of going out. They're intent on seizing back **the Acropolis**. As they shuffle on, they gripe about their wives ("she's a National Disaster," one named Swifty moans) and about the catastrophes brought on by matriarchy. The Koryphaios urges the wretchedly slow old men onward. They'll try and burn the women who organized the rebellion, he proclaims. The men also recall how, some one hundred years ago, they ousted the Spartan Kleomenes, a historical figure who occupied the Acropolis in 508 BC.

*The men represented in the play are mostly old, because the young Athenian men are off fighting in the war. The torches, fire, and smoke are images of the male anatomy and of waning virility. One of Aristophanes' persistent ironies is that, while the men moan about their wives being "National Disasters," the men themselves have brought disaster to Athens through their political corruption and reckless ambition. The women, far from being like Kleomenes, are the true Athenian patriots.*

As the Chorus of Old Men nears **the Acropolis**, the old men increasingly struggle to carry their torches and firepots uphill. To prevent the fire from going out, moreover, they blow into their pots, only to send forth clouds of smoke. The men cough and choke, and smoke gnaws their eyeballs. Nonetheless, they reach the Acropolis gate. Their first plan is to crash it down, and if that fails, they'll ask to be admitted politely. Their last resort is to "burn the damned door down." The men get into a horrible, confused tangle as they deposit their logs, but somehow manage. The Male Koryphaios then offers a prayer to **Athena**: "Grant us victory, male supremacy."

*Just as the men's political policies have backfired on Athens, so too do the Chorus's pots of fire. Characteristic of the men's incompetence and arrogance is their natural decision to first resort to violence against the women, and then to try diplomacy only after that. The men are also self-destructive in their pride: they'd rather burn their own citadel down than listen to the call of conscience and reason. It's also ironic that the men pray to Athena—a female goddess of wisdom—for the victory of their cause (which is essentially masculinity and foolishness).*

While the Chorus of Old Men prepares the torches, the Chorus of Old Women, led by their Female Koryphaios, suddenly enters, wearing long cloaks and bearing pitchers of water filled earlier at the fountains in town. The women are old, but younger than the men, and they are quite spry. Noticing the smoke, the women dash over to put out the fire before its too late, praying as they do so for **Athena**'s protection from "Man's inhumanity."

*The women's pitchers of water represent sexual abstinence; the women plan on putting out the fire of war by not putting out, as it were. The women's relative spryness suggests an ethical health lacking in their male counterparts. The women, like the men, pray to Athena, and the goddess seems to favor their cause. This brings up the broader point that the women aren't really "rebelling" at all—they're the ones being true to the spirit of Athens, not the men.*

The two Choruses at last come face to face with one another. The Chorus of Old Men is surprised by the "flood of reserves" the Chorus of Old Women has managed to muster. The Male Koryphaios asks for volunteers to pulverize the women—"just a few jabs" to silence the women's backtalk—but no one comes forward. The Female Koryphaios then advances and offers her male counterpart a "free shot." The two exchange threats, but after the female Koryphaios threatens to "leave no balls on the body for other bitches to gnaw," the male Koryphaios hurriedly retreats.

*Aristophanes' text is loaded with plays on words and puns like "flood of reserves." The subplot of the male Koryphaios and his female counterpart mirrors the main plot of the play. The obscenity of the dialogue here is characteristic of Old Comedy; its purpose is to surprise us into new ways of thinking about the world, to liberate us from sterile stereotypes and business as usual.*

The Chorus of Old Men and the Chorus of Old Women fire more threats and insults back and forth. The men threaten to barbecue the women; the women threaten to douse the men's fire and to give them a bath. When the men at last ready their torches, the women empty their pitchers over them, soaking them. The women call it "gardening." "Perhaps you'll bloom," the Female Koryphaios tells the men. The men, for their part, are "withered, frozen, shaking." Shivering, the Chorus of Men retreat, utterly defeated.

*The irrational, disturbing violence of the men's threats is appropriately tempered by the more charmingly domestic threats of the women. Water is not an element of destruction here, but of wakefulness, cleansing, and rebirth. The women don't want to destroy their men; they want to cultivate them in accordance with the Athenian values they've forgotten.*

A Commissioner of Public Safety enters from the left, reluctantly followed by a squad of police made up of four Scythian archers. He surveys the situation with disapproval. The Commissioner makes a speech claiming that overly emotional women were in large part responsible for creating an atmosphere in which demagogues could support a military expedition to Sicily. He then concludes that the "Gift of Woman" is nothing but "MORAL CHAOS!"

*The Commissioner is more reasonable and curious as to the women's motives than the old men of the Chorus; he is a representative of Athenian values, law, and order at home. That being said, he does not recognize that it is the warmongering men who have plunged Athens into moral chaos, not the women.*

The Male Koryphaios urges the Commissioner to bring charges against the Chorus of Old Women, but the Commissioner says that the women are, counter-intuitively, in the right. Why? Because men taught women how to be lustful and rebellious. We shouldn't have left our wives alone with goldsmiths and cobblers, the Commissioner argues, because the ensuing "hanky-panky [is what] what we have to thank for today's / Utter Anarchy." The Commissioner concludes that he needs to access the war treasury in **the Acropolis**, and orders his squad of police to pry the gate open with a crowbar.

*The Commissioner rightly protects the women, but for the wrong reasons. They are not being lustful and rebellious, as he claims; they are abstaining from sex out of patriotism. His reasoning is actually quite ridiculous, and characteristic of the blinding pride Aristophanes is calling out in his play—a refusal to see that this "Anarchy" is the result of male pride, not female infidelity. The Commissioner's claim also brings up ideas of male insecurity, playing up the idea of the "cuckold" for comic effect.*

Just then, the gate to **the Acropolis** bursts open, revealing Lysistrata. She is perfectly composed and is holding a large spindle, an instrument used to spin thread. She tells the Commissioner that he doesn't need crowbars so much as brains. Outraged, the Commissioner sends a policeman to arrest Lysistrata, but she repels him with a vicious jab of her spindle. The Commissioner orders a second policeman to do the same, but Kleonike forces him to retreat by threatening to "stomp the shit right out of [him]" with a chamber pot. Myrrhine repels a third policeman by brandishing a blazing lamp, and Ismenia repels the fourth by brandishing "a huge pair of pincers."

*The women are not trying to usurp political power in Athens; they are merely trying to motivate healthy political dialogue and change. This is why Lysistrata emerges from the Acropolis of her own free will to speak with the Commissioner. Significantly, the women fight not with weapons but with domestic goods, which is a metaphor for how they are leveraging basic human needs to effect political change. Such needs will always be more powerful than mere force.*

The Commissioner orders the policeman to regroup and charge as a unit, but a horde of women brandishing household goods pours from **the Acropolis**. Lysistrata urges these "ladies of hell" onward, these bargain hunters and "grocery grenadiers." The policemen are swiftly routed. The dazed Commissioner mutters about his men's incompetence, while Lysistrata celebrates the freedom and power of women. The Male Koryphaios suggests in turn that women aren't capable of rational discourse. Dodging a blow from him, the Female Koryphaios points out that striking at one's neighbor "is scarcely civilized" either, and she swings at him with a pitcher. He's forced to hurriedly back away. The Chorus of Old Men goes into a worried dance.

*Unified in their desire for peace, the women are stronger than any "police" could be. The Commissioner's men are not so much incompetent as overwhelmed by a superior ethical force. It is ironic that the Male Koryphaios accuses the women of being incapable of rational discourse, when he himself resorts to irrational diatribes and violence in expressing his point of view. Aristophanes comically plays up the males' defeat in the "battle of the sexes," but he does so without any real criticism of the status quo of male supremacy—he's only criticizing men acting irrationally, not the Athenian patriarchy itself.*

The Commissioner asks Lysistrata why the women are blockading the Treasury. Lysistrata responds that money is the cause of the war and all internal disorder in Athens. She proposes that women budget the city's money, just as they do already in their own households. The War Effort will wither, but "who needs the War Effort?" as Lysistrata says. She promises to save the men from themselves out of friendship, to which the Commissioner responds: "I DO NOT WANT TO BE SAVED, DAMMIT!"

*Money has created both greed and the means of doing harm in Athens, hence Lysistrata's condemnation of it. The management of a state should be more like the management of a household, she thinks, and therefore women are ideal for the work. The Commissioner's refusal to be saved speaks to the political stagnation and neurosis of Athens at large.*

Why do the women even care about War and Peace? asks the Commissioner. Lysistrata responds that the women have tolerated for long enough their husbands' mismanagement of affairs of state and their "staggering incompetence," and that they were told to shut up by their husbands for even referencing Peace. That is, until the men went too far and "fumbled the City away in the Senate." The women knew then that Athens didn't need a Man, but "Peace in Greece" itself, which only they could bring about. "We'll straighten you and set you right," promises Lysistrata.

*Even though the Commissioner says that he does not want to be saved, he at least has the openness of mind to inquire into the women's motives. Lysistrata is quick to point out that it was the extremity of political mismanagement in Athens that brought about such an extreme reaction from the women; the women, in other words, are not challenging the status quo lightly.*

The Commissioner is outraged by Lysistrata's presumptuousness, but she shuts him up, winding her veil around his head. Kleonike and Myrrhine join in with comb and wool-basket as well, and soon enough the Commissioner is transformed into a woman. He should stay at home for a change, Lysistrata says, while the women end the war.

*The Commissioner's transformation into a woman is a complicated gesture. In becoming female he is silenced, as the Athenian women have been historically, but he is also being invited to see things through a woman's (potentially more reasonable) eyes. On yet another level, Aristophanes is here playing with the dramatic convention itself (as Shakespeare would later do) for some lowbrow comic effect. The actors would have all been men, half of them dressed and acting as women, so the Commissioner's onstage transformation would have seemed especially funny to the (potentially all-male) audience.*

While the Commissioner struggles to remove his new outfit, Lysistrata tells the Chorus of Old Women to dance and sing. They celebrate their willpower and the excellence of women, from Beauty to Common Sense. The Female Koryphaios has words of encouragement for all, and Lysistrata anticipates that soon the men will crack under the pressure of Love, and Peace will be restored.

*Lysistrata and Kleonike, among others, maligned women earlier in the play, such that this song represents a turning point in the play's valuation of women generally.* Lysistrata *may not be a proto-feminist play exactly, but it does at least affirm the value and power of women.*

The Commissioner asks how the women intend to achieve their goal. Lysistrata responds that the women first intend to withdraw the Army of Occupation from downtown Athens. Kleonike adds that she saw a cavalry captain buy soup on horseback there and carry it in his helmet, and that another soldier was menacing a saleslady and stealing her figs. Lysistrata explains that Greece is "rather like yarn"—snarled yarn, to be exact, and she plans on smoothing it out by sending out "Special Commissions…to ravel these tense international kinks." "Typically wooly female logic," the Commissioner says dismissively.

*Characteristically, the women want to remove the military from the domestic sphere altogether. The funny yet troubling stories about soldiers in the market exemplify why. Instead of having affairs of state bleed into domestic life, Lysistrata would treat affairs of state like the domestic craft of working with wool. This is one of the most famous metaphors in the play—it joins together in one image politics and basic human needs (which the men have sundered and lost sight of), along with the "female" domestic sphere (and some puns).*

Lysistrata retorts that if the Commissioner were logical at all, he'd adopt her plan. She extends her wool metaphor: as fleece needs to be scrubbed, beaten to rid it of vermin, combed of its lumps and knots and snarls, and expertly woven, so too does Athens need to be cleansed of filth, rid of incompetent parasites, and politically reunified if it is to properly fit the Athenian spirit.

*The Commissioner dismisses Lysistrata's plan out of hand, not so much because it is an irrational plan, but out of sexist reflex.*

All this, the Commissioner complains, coming from women who had nothing to do with the war! It's Lysistrata's turn to be outraged: the women gave up their sons to the war effort in Sicily, and they lived the best years of their lives sleeping alone. Many virgins grew out of their prime, she mourns, without the chance to marry. The men who come back old from war can marry "the veriest nymphet," she goes on, but a woman who slips from her prime will have no husband.

*The Commissioner wrongly assumes that war is men's business only, but Lysistrata reminds him that affairs of state are everyone's business. The women's quality of life falls in times of war, just as the men's does. To make it worse, there is an outrageously sexist double standard in Athens concerning marriageability and age. (The "nymphet" of the translation is also an allusion, whether intentional or not, to Nabokov's Lolita.)*

The Commissioner seems genuinely persuaded by the women's plight—but then only calls upon the Athenian men to fight all the more vigorously. Lysistrata bangs the Commissioner on the head with her spindle and winds him in thread; Kleonike empties her chamber pot over him; Myrrhine breaks her lamp on his head. To choose war, the women suggest, is to choose death. The Commissioner staggers off, and the women re-enter **the Acropolis**.

*The Commissioner feels the power of Lysistrata's arguments, but he is so set in his bad ways that he is moved by them only to support the war effort all the more zealously. In choosing war, the Athenians might as well destroy themselves and their homes.*

The Male Koryphaios rouses the men. They strip down to their short tunics and advance toward the audience: they smell radical disorder in the air, "an absolutist plot." They think the Spartans must be masterminding the women's rebellion "to commandeer the City's cash." The Male Koryphaios denounces tyranny, bashes the Female Koryphaios "in the jaw," and runs cackling back to the Chorus of Old Men.

*As the battle of the sexes intensifies, the Choruses strip off more and more clothing. This reflects the intensification of their passion, and also their return to the bare necessities of life, which politics has obscured. The men's paranoia is most punctuated here, and shows to what extent they are disconnected from reality.*

The members of the Chorus of Old Women then strip down to their short tunics, and they sing of their high pedigree as participants in Athenian religious life. The Female Koryphaios reminds the audience, "I hold stock in Athens—stock I paid for in sons." The men, she says, are merely doddering bankrupts. She then runs over and hits the Male Koryphaios in the jaw with her slipper.

*The women, as participants in religious life and as the mothers of Athens, have just as much a stake in the city-state as their husbands do. The Female Koryphaios' line about losing sons is a poignant moment in the midst of comedic chaos.*

The members of the Chorus of Old Men have had it: they remove their tunics. The Male Koryphaios reasons that the men can't attack the women on horseback, because "a woman is an easy rider with a natural seat," and instead he attempts to snare his female counterpart around the neck to stick her in the stocks. The Female Koryphaios works herself loose, however, and chases him away. The women now remove *their* tunics, angry at the birdbrained men. The Female Koryphaios isn't afraid: she's got friends from Sparta and Thebes, like Lampito and Ismenia. The worst the men can do, she mocks, is pass some absurd law. She grabs her male counterpart by the ankle and throws him off balance. The Chorus of Old Men retires in confusion.

*The conflict between the men and women reaches its highest pitch here. The Female Koryphaios' barb about men passing an absurd law is part of Aristophanes' career-long satire of Athenian litigiousness (that is, he thinks that Athens both passes too many laws and hosts too many lawsuits). From this point on, the members of the Chorus are naked, which is part of the play's outrageous bawdy comedy, and also a sign that Athens is returning to the bare necessities of human life.*

## LINES 706 – 979

A distraught Lysistrata emerges from **the Acropolis**. In a lofty speech more suitable for a tragedy than a comedy, she reveals that the women are losing their resolve. "We want to get laid," she says, and indeed the girls are going wild. They're trying to escape by tunnel and rope. One woman pretends she's going home to save her wool from the moths, another so that she can "pluck the fibers" of her flax. Another woman stuffs **Athena**'s sacred helmet in her clothing so that she appears pregnant, the better to sneak off from the Acropolis and rendezvous with her lover. Lysistrata orders them all to get back inside.

*In parodying tragic speech here, Aristophanes reminds us that we are watching a fantasy unfold, and not a fatalistic but a hopeful one. This sense is reinforced by the fact that not only the men but also the women become hot and bothered over the course of the play. Sex is a basic human need, but it also has its ridiculous qualities, which Aristophanes exploits for comic effect.*

The other women begin to crowd around Lysistrata. Kleonike complains of "those goddamned holy owls" in **the Acropolis** who hoot all night long. But Lysistrata understands that the women are really bothered by being away from their men. The women nod shamefacedly to acknowledge it. In response, Lysistrata pulls out a scroll on which is written a prophecy: when the swallows leave their accustomed perch, then the great god Zeus will end their suffering, but if the swallows return to their perch prematurely, their flocks will dissolve. Understanding the oracle's message, the women troop back inside the Acropolis.

*To retain the women's loyalty, Lysistrata must remind them of what they're fighting for, hence the prophecy she reads. The swallows are the women, their perch is the citadel, and the end of their suffering is a peaceful resolution of the war. The women, at last, value lasting peace more than instant gratification of their desires.*

The two Choruses assemble. The Chorus of Old Men sing proudly of a huntsman called Melanion who learned to live without women, "sustained by rabbit meat and hate." One of them attempts to kiss an old woman nonetheless, but then she threatens him with her fist. He tries to kick her but misses, "exposing an overgrown underbrush." The Chorus of Old Women then sing about a local grouch named Timon who hated only men and befriended women; he is the women's "antidote" for Melanion. An old woman, for her part, now tries to kick an old man, but she misses, "brazenly baring the mantrap below." At least it's clean and smooth, she says.

*The men's strength of will is at last breaking, as indicated by the male Chorus member's attempt to kiss the old woman. Just as Melanion and Timon are parallel opposites, throughout the play the actions of the Chorus of Old Men are paralleled by the actions of their female counterparts. This suggests at once the opposition of the men and women in the play, but also their underlying unity. It is a "battle of the sexes," but also just sex between the sexes.*

Lysistrata mounts a platform and scans the horizon. Then she stops suddenly, and orders her women to their battle stations: a man is approaching, and he's enflamed with love (as we later learn, "in erection and considerable pain"). Myrrhine identifies this man as her husband, Kinesias. Lysistrata reminds Myrrhine that her duty is to sexually excite her husband without breaking the Oath, and Lysistrata herself offers to stay and help "poke up the fire." All the other women exit, and Myrrhine hides from her husband's view. Kinesias staggers onstage, followed by a male slave who carries a baby boy.

*The entrance of Kinesias initiates the climax of the play—will Myrrhine break the sex strike, or will she persevere in the name of peace? We might find it strange that Lysistrata stays to help Myrrhine—perhaps she is offering moral support, perhaps she wants to be on hand in case Myrrhine's strength of will breaks, or perhaps she too is reluctantly swayed by desire for a man.*

"WHO PENETRATES OUR POSITIONS," asks Lysistrata. Kinesias identifies himself, and Lysistrata pretends to be overcome. The name "Kinesias," she says, is famous among the women of Athens, and they even have a nickname for his incomparable member. Kinesias demands to speak to Myrrhine, but Lysistrata asks what she herself would get out of it. "I'll raise whatever I can," he says. Goodness, says Lysistrata, that's really something for his wife to do.

*Lysistrata is probably flattering Kinesias to exacerbate his desire here, as once again Aristophanes shows how male aggression and greed is often tied up in sexual insecurity (as when the Commissioner blamed the female overthrow of Athens on cuckolded husbands). Aristophanes continues to enjoy his own bawdy humor in the dialogue.*

Lysistrata moves to where Myrrhine is hidden and the two have a conversation in voices designed to be overheard. Myrrhine says that she's mad about her husband, but that he doesn't want her love. Kinesias calls her, and she appears at the wall. He *begs* her to come down, going so far as to take up their baby boy in his arms and fiercely order it to call to its mother. The child cries for his mommy (he hasn't been washed or fed for a week, so says the father), and Myrrhine pityingly descends at last. Kinesias says he doesn't think his wife has ever looked so hot.

*One motif in the play is that the older men of Athens neglect the young (e.g. by pursuing needless wars of conquest in which they themselves don't fight). This is aptly signified in Kinesias' neglect of his son— which is also, of course, exaggerated to enflame Myrrhine's pity and compassion.*

Myrrhine takes her baby in her arms. Kinesias says she ought to be ashamed of herself because the household is falling apart without her. Myrrhine responds that she'll come home only once the Athenians agree to a truce and stop the war. Desperate, Kinesias asks his wife to lie down with him for a minute. "We'll talk," he says. Myrrhine says it would be disgusting to do it in front of the baby, so Kinesias sends the baby home with the slave. He then begins to persuade his wife to break the Oath.

*Kinesias' shaming of his wife is doubly ironic: the household is falling apart because of* his *neglect at this point, not his wife's, and his wife was forced to leave the household in the first place because of her husband and his fellows' incompetence in affairs of state.*

Myrrhine seems to acquiesce, but she says she can't make love on the ground. She goes off to get a cot from **the Acropolis**. She returns—but, she just remembered, the couple will need a mattress, too. Kinesias says he doesn't want a mattress, but off his wife goes to get one, giving him the lightest of kisses to tide him over. Myrrhine returns with a mattress, only to play a similar game of prolongation by fetching a pillow, a blanket, and not one but two bottles of perfume.

*Myrrhine's game of prolongation arouses suspense but is also an opportunity for lots of comedy. It also emphasizes how luxuries can separate us from the bare necessities of life. In this sense, the most destructive luxuries in the play are political ambition, greed, and pride—luxuries which Athens cannot afford if they are also to maintain basic human needs (like sex).*

Myrrhine then begins to undress, and she asks Kinesias whether he'll remember to vote for the truce. When he gives a noncommittal response, however, Myrrhine runs off for good. Kinesias mourns her departure in a parody of tragic lamentation. He asks that Zeus reduce the throbbing of his erect member. The Male Koryphaios prays that the god unleash his thunder on Kinesias' sluttish wife, pick her up in a strong wind, and drop her right onto her husband's member. Kinesias exits left.

*Kinesias is still not prepared to give up war in favor of his basic needs, and this fact signals to Myrrhine that the sex strike must go on. Kinesias' tragic lamentation points to how self-defeating the men's actions are, and also plays up how hilariously overwhelming their desire is. The Male Koryphaios is once again the epitome of misogyny and frustrated impotence.*

## LINES 980 – 1323

A Spartan herald enters right, holding his cloak in an attempt to conceal his erection. He has news concerning a truce. The Commissioner enters from the left. He suspects the Spartan is packing a concealed weapon beneath his cloak, but throws it open only to expose the poor, wildly embarrassed man's phallus. The Spartan herald, however, says that his penis is not really a penis at all, but rather a Spartan epistle in code. The Commissioner then throws open his cloak to expose his own erection: it is they key, he jokes, by which the code can be cracked.

*Myrrhine's putting-off of Kinesias represents the breaking of the men's will and the victory of the women. The Commissioner's suspicion of the Spartan herald is unfounded, obviously—Aristophanes is suggesting that, rather than be suspicious of their neighbors, the Athenians should commiserate with them (particularly when it comes to basic aspects of humanity, like sexuality).*

The Spartan herald and the Commissioner get down to business. The herald informs the Commissioner that Lampito has sown disorder in the Peloponnesian League, driving the men mad with painful lust. The Commissioner orders the herald to have a Commission sent to Athens empowered to conclude a truce. Both men exit hurriedly.

*The women's sex strike has touched all of Greece, and the men at last recognize that basic human needs override all else. Just as personal lust has brought about political change within the play, so the play itself seeks to bring about such change through its comedy and satire.*

The Male Koryphaios curses Woman as "the pride of applied immorality." His female counterpart attempts to befriend him, but he proclaims his credo to be "*Misogyny Forever!*" Nonetheless, the Female Koryphaios puts his clothes back on him out of pity. This sincere gesture softens the heart of the old man, who expresses his embarrassment.

*Just as Athens and Sparta are being reconciled, so too are the men and women of the Chorus. Shallow ideologies, like the "battle of the sexes," cannot survive when in conflict with basic human needs. Even the unlikeable Male Koryphaios is finally made into a more sympathetic character.*

The Female Koryphaios then offers to extract the beast, the bug in the old man's eye, that's been supposedly causing all of his problems. The Male Koryphaios plays along and lets the old woman remove an imaginary insect from his eye. He is "cured" and weeps. The old woman wipes away his tears and kisses him. The two Choruses agree that there shall be no more mischief between them, and then they address the audience in song. The Chorus of Old Men wish the Athenians wealth, and the Chorus of Old Women wish them good eating.

*The Female Koryphaios very charitably gives her male counterpart an excuse for his bad behavior, so that he does not have to bear the full burden of responsibility. This is a fiction that both the man and woman accept to strengthen their relationship, just as* Lysistrata *is a fiction for the Greeks to accept in order to achieve peace.*

A delegation of Spartans enters from the right, all of them attempting to cloak their erections, followed soon after by an Athenian delegation, in as big a pickle as the Spartans. The men all open their cloaks and commiserate. Kinesias, one of the delegates, wants to get hold of Lysistrata; only peace can cure the malady of the Greek men. The Male Koryphaios, for his part, advises that the Spartans cover their erections, lest the women knock them off as they've been doing to statues. All the men follow his advice.

*This is one of the most famous comic images of the play, and with it Aristophanes also profoundly humanizes the Greek men. They are naked, needy animals more than they are glorious conquerors—bound by a common humanity more than they are divided by nationality. This image of leveling thus ultimately gestures toward the absurdity of fighting with one another.*

Kinesias finally notices the Spartans. "Why are you here?" he asks. The Spartans say that they're ambassadors who've come to talk about Peace. Perfect! But only Lysistrata can truly make Peace. Sure enough, she emerges at once from **the Acropolis**, to much praise from the Male Koryphaios. Lysistrata is also accompanied by Peace herself, who is personified as a beautiful naked girl. Peace remains out of sight till Lysistrata summons her—but when she emerges, the Greek men ogle her and follow her to a position near Lysistrata.

*The Male Koryphaios, who began the play by denigrating women in the vilest terms, at last recognizes Lysistrata's excellence and the excellence of peace. Although Peace is personified as a sexually desirable girl, the play is not interested so much in lust here as it is in the civilizing, uniting power of erotic love.*

Lysistrata pontificates about the brotherhood of the Greeks, and about how they share a common enemy whom they're benefitting by fighting one another: the Persians. She's interrupted by Kinesias, who is impatient with a lust for Peace, but she serenely ignores him. Lysistrata reminds the Spartans how Athens recently provided them with military assistance, and she reminds the Athenians how Sparta liberated them from tyranny. A Spartan praises Lysistrata, and Kinesias praises Peace as the most desirable woman he's ever seen. Lysistrata, oblivious to all this, asks the Greeks to stop their wicked fighting and to make peace.

*Lysistrata's comment about the Persians makes sense only if we remember that the Greco-Persian Wars took place only some twenty years before the Peloponnesian War began. In that earlier conflict, the Athenians and Spartans fought together against the Persians. Lysistrata is attempting to reunite the Greeks by demonizing a common enemy. Here it's made clear that* Lysistrata *is not a universally pacifist (or feminist) play. Aristophanes doesn't condemn war or patriarchal society in themselves—only war when it's irrational, and only men when they're acting foolish.*

A Spartan and Kinesias begin to draw up terms—pointing to the naked Peace as they do so. The Spartans want the "butte," while Kinesias claims the "Easy Mountain" and "the Maniac Gulf," among other things. An argument flares, but Lysistrata quells it at once to smiles of agreement. The men's ardor "to plow a few furrows" in Peace and "to work a few loads of fertilizer in" quickly burns away all warlike thoughts. Peace is made.

*The bawdy image of Peace as territory to be negotiated over cleverly (if sexistly) joins together the ideas of sexual excitement, friendly rivalry, common goals, and new creation (see the bawdy agricultural metaphors). Quarrels do not need to be eliminated, only amicably resolved.*

Lysistrata promises the Greek men a feast, and with that she and Peace enter **the Acropolis**. The delegations exit at a run. The Chorus of Old Women sing about jewelry on offer—the joke is they don't really have anything to sell. The Chorus of Old Men, meanwhile, offer free wheat to the audience—the joke being that they own a tremendous unleashed dog that will bite you like hell if you try to claim some.

*It is appropriate that a play all about frustrated appetite should end with a feast. The Chorus's jokes here remind us that we're watching a fantasy of plenty, and that if we really want jewels and wheat, so to speak, we have to enact political reform in the real world.*

The Choruses flock together, unified at last, to the door of **the Acropolis**. The Commissioner, wearing a wreath, carrying a torch, and slightly drunk, emerges from therein. He brandishes his torch to disperse loiterers and restore order, then gives this up as being beneath his dignity (and also in response to imagined protests from the audience), and allows the newly unified Chorus to celebrate.

*The unification of the Chorus resolves the play's subplot about the fighting old men and women. The Commissioner only plays at enforcing regulations here, because he recognizes that the raucous celebration is in the spirit of Athenian law, if not in its letter.*

Kinesias also emerges from **the Acropolis**, wreathed and drunk. Speaking in the Spartan dialect, he praises the feast as "splendiferous." Wine smoothed things over between the Greek men very effectively. The Commissioner thinks about instituting a new rule: every ambassador should be a bit drunk when doing his duties. Cold-water diplomacy just leads to suspicion and paranoia.

*Kinesias speaks in the Spartan dialect (which Aristophanes still gently mocks) because he has rediscovered his brotherhood with those fellow Greeks. As the women drank wine when taking their oath to fight for peace, so is wine here imagined to promote sociability and unity.*

Everyone now emerges from **the Acropolis**, including the Spartan and Athenian delegations, a flutist, and Lysistrata and her women. The flutist plays and the Spartans slowly dance, singing in honor of their patron hunting goddess, Artemis, and of past Spartan heroes like Leonidas, who was famous for his role in the Battle of Thermopylae waged against the Persians.

*Although Aristophanes' comedy was performed for the Athenians, he gives the Spartans pride of place and patriotic songs to sing. He was trying to cultivate among the Athenians fellow feeling with the Spartans; notice that he again brings up the Persians as a common enemy of the Greeks.*

When the Spartans end their song, Lysistrata returns the Peloponnesian women held hostage in Athens back to the Spartans. She also releases the Athenian wives back to their husbands. "Let's not make the same mistakes again," she cautions. The delegations obey her orders and together they sing an ode to Bacchus, god of wine, to Zeus and Hera, the highest of heavenly couples, and finally to Aphrodite, goddess of Love.

*Peace and trust are fully restored only when the Peloponnesian women are restored to the Spartans. The ode to the god of wine celebrates the comic spirit and the ideals of sociability and pleasure, while the ode to Zeus and Hera celebrates the ideal of marriage (although Zeus and Hera's marriage was far from ideal, but that's another story).*

Lysistrata, in closing, invites the Spartans to sing a final song. The Spartans invoke the "Spartan muse" and sing a lively ode to dancing, beautiful girls, Spartan rivers, and **Athena**. Everyone then exits, dancing and singing.

*Aristophanes honors the Spartans by giving them the last word of his comedy. This is something of a peace offering, even if it's made with some gentle mockery and comic outlandishness. The ode's theme is the satisfaction of basic human needs—what all reasonable and just states and policies are supposed to uphold. Though the play ends with peace and happiness, it's also important to remember that Aristophanes' political comedy wasn't heeded by the higher-ups in the Greek government—the Peloponnesian War continued for several years after* Lysistrata*'s debut, and Athens eventually surrendered to its enemies amidst desperate circumstances. Yet despite the fact that* Lysistrata *may not have effected immediate political change in the way Aristophanes intended, his play endures as a brilliant, comic appeal to the basic needs and pleasures of humanity in the face of political pride, intrigue, and stubbornness.*

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