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ARISTOPHANES
LYSISTRATA

Translated with Introduction
and Notes

Jeffrey Henderson

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*

**Translated with
Introduction and Notes**

**Jeffrey Henderson
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Cover Photo: Courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, H.L. Pierce Fund. Two actors, dressing in costumes that depict women, prepare for a performance. A mask portraying a woman lies between them.

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Preface

Lysistrata, first performed in 411 BC, is, of all the plays of Aristophanes, probably the most popular with modern readers and audiences. Its lively and imaginative plot, its memorable heroine, its many good jokes, its appeal for peace and tolerance between the sexes and among people and nations give it a timeless appeal. Today it is just as entertaining as theater, and just as relevant as a view of the best and the worst of Western civilization, as it was over two millennia ago. In its mirror modern men and women can catch a glimpse of where we came from, where our best ideals have aimed us, and how far we have come (or not come) thus far.

This is a translation of *Lysistrata* into contemporary American verse, designed for both readers and performers, and presupposing no knowledge of classical Greece or classical Greek theater. I render the Greek text line by line so as to give a sense of its original scope and pace, using for the dialogue and songs verse-forms that are familiar to modern audiences. Where the original text refers to people, places, things and events whose significance modern audiences cannot reasonably be expected to comprehend, I have tried to find easily comprehensible alternatives that preserve the import of the original. The most important of these references are identified and discussed in the notes for the benefit of historically minded readers.

The conventions of Aristophanic comedy included the frank portrayal and discussion of religion, politics and sex (including nudity and obscenity). In *Lysistrata* all three are brilliantly intertwined. I have reproduced this feature as accurately as possible within my general guideline of easy comprehensibility. To do otherwise would be to falsify the play. These three areas are of fundamental importance to any society; one of Aristophanes' chief aims was to make humor of them while at the same time encouraging his audience to think about them in ways discouraged, or even forbid-

den, outside the comic theater. For those made uncomfortable by such a portrayal of one or more of these three areas of life, *Lysistrata* provides an opportunity to ask themselves why.

The Introduction contains sections on Aristophanes and the genre of Attic Old Comedy which his plays represent; *Lysistrata* and the historical situation to which it was originally addressed; conventions of ancient production with suggestions for modern performers; and suggestions for further reading. Like the translation and notes, the Introduction requires no previous expertise, and so is suitable for readers and students making their first acquaintance with Aristophanes.

The translation is based on my own edition of the Greek text, with Introduction and Commentary (Clarendon Press: Oxford 1987).

Los Angeles
September 1987

JJH

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*

CHARACTERS

SPEAKING CHARACTERS

Lysistrata, an Athenian woman	Rod, Myrrhine's husband
Calonice, an Athenian wife	Spartan Herald
Myrrhine, an Athenian wife	Spartan Ambassador
Lampito, a Spartan woman	Athenian Ambassador
Magistrate, an Athenian bureaucrat	Athenian, friend of the
Old Women, three helpers of Lysistrata	Ambassador

MUTE CHARACTERS

Athenian Wives	Nurse with Rod
Foreign Wives	Baby with Rod
Policewoman with Wives	Reconciliation, a naked girl
Slaves with Magistrate	Spartan Husbands
Police with Magistrate	Athenian Husbands
Athenian Old Women	Doorkeeper

CHORUS

Old War-Veterans, twelve	Old Wives, twelve
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SCENE I

Lysistrata

If I'd invited them to drink some wine^o
or talk about the kids or go out dancing,
you'd hear the sound of high heels everywhere.
But now there's not a single wife in sight.

1 Comic wives are conventionally portrayed as very fond of drinking, dancing and noise-making. In reality, wives' everyday access to wine and opportunities for revelry were severely restricted by husbands. But at some festivals (those honoring the wine-god Dionysus, for example) these restrictions were relaxed, and at others (those exclusive to women) they were unenforceable. Women could also meet together informally at a shrine: here Lysistrata mentions shrines of Dionysus, Pan and Aphrodite. Comedians, who catered to male audiences, portrayed wives' religious activities as mere excuses for drinking and revelry. Aristophanes exploits this stereotype extensively in his portrayal of the wives in this play, but from the start he is careful to exempt the heroine.

Well, here's my next-door neighbor, anyway. 5
 Hi, Calonice.^o

Calonice

Hi to you, Lysistrata.
 Hey, why the dirty looks? Cheer up, kiddo.
 Don't frown, you'll wrinkle up your pretty face.

Lysistrata

I'm angry, Calonice, deeply hurt,
 in fact offended by the wives, by *us*, 10
 because, according to our husbands we're
 the best at clever schemes—

Calonice

And that's the truth.

Lysistrata

—but when I tell them all to meet me here,
 to scheme about the most important things,
 they're sleeping in and don't show up.

Calonice

They'll show. 15
 It's not so easy getting out this early.
 We've got to do our husbands little favors,
 we've got to get the servants out of bed,
 we've got to wash and feed and burp the kids.

Lysistrata

But they've got more important things to do 20
 than those!

Calonice

OK, Lysistrata, suppose
 you tell me why we're meeting here. The deal.
 Is it a big one?

Lysistrata

Very big.

Calonice

Not hard as well?

Lysistrata

It's very hard.

6 In Greek the name Calonice means 'Fair Victory' ('Victoria' would be a modern equivalent), but it is an untypical form of the name and so may have been specially chosen: to suggest an upper-class background, or perhaps even to allude to an actual person.

One of Aristophanes' greatest comedies available with notes and introductions by one of the most important scholars and translators of Greek comedy.

"Henderson's *Lysistrata* is lively, cheerfully vulgar, and genuinely funny....."

Philip Holt, *The Classical Outlook*

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