

Lysistrata and Gender Roles in Ancient Greece

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The comedic play *Lysistrata*, written by Aristophanes, is a satire addressing the problems of war in ancient Greece and the gender roles of both women and men in society. The play begins with the main character Lysistrata calling upon the women of ancient Greece and explaining that in order to establish peace and stop the men from going to war, the women must refrain from sex with their husbands, while seducing them so the men will covet them. The women agree and unite; as a result, they gain control of the citadel and the treasury which makes them in charge of the finance and city-states, and which the men find upsetting. The men, no longer able to tame their sexual desires, submit to the women and sign a treaty to end war between the city-states of ancient Greece, hence bringing peace and great celebration. This play illustrates the gender roles of women and men in ancient Greece, emphasizing the house-bound and dutiful nature of ancient Greek women, the lack of political power of women in government, and the misogynistic and lustful attitudes of Greek men toward women in ancient Greek society.

Calonice explains to Lysistrata that it is “not easy...for women to leave the house” because a woman is “busy pottering about her husband...getting the servant up... putting her child asleep or washing the brat or feeding it”(1). In other words the women in ancient Greek society were seen as housewives in charge of household chores. Consequently, many women were surprised when Lysistrata claims Greece can be “saved by the women”(2). Calonice claims “how should women perform so wise and glorious an achievement” when they “dwell in the retirement of the household”(3). This is to say that women in ancient Greece spent their time at home and were not seen as political figures let alone saviors or heroes. What is more, Lysistrata mentions how the poets depicted women as “good for nothing then but love and lewdness”(8). Women were not seen as political figures but just as sexual beings used to satiate their husbands sexual covets. Moreover, this sexual nature is viewed when Lysistrata states, “I cannot stop them any longer from their lusting after the men”(31). Here we see the women’s acceptance of social norms in ancient Greece and the duty women felt towards their husbands. Also women in Greece were viewed as their husband’s property suggesting that their husbands can take them by force if they deny them sex as seen when Calonice asks Lysistrata, “But if they beatus?”(9).

The women did not play a big role in ancient Greek politics and therefore Lysistrata’s attempt to involve women in government was frowned upon by the men.

This is shown when the women conquer the citadel and the men attempt to burn everything to the ground, leading to the involvement of the Magistrate who tells the women, “But what a notion, to concern yourselves with questions of peace and war,” further illustrating how women were not seen as having a place in Greek government (23). To emphasize this issue, Lysistrata explains how women “endured in modest silence” when the men would speak of war and if they voiced their opinion they would be silenced by the men saying “War is men’s business” (24).

Ultimately, the satire *Lysistrata* addresses the problems of war and, more importantly, the gender roles of both women and men in society. The play illustrates how Lysistrata manages to unite the women of ancient Greece, convincing them that if they refrain from sex while seducing their husbands they could bring peace to Greece. The men, no longer able to control their lust, decide to do their bidding; in effect, the men sign a treaty to end war in Greece.

Work Cited

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