

Aristophanes, Leymah Gbowee, and Spike Lee: understanding modern reception with students

Of Aristophanes' comedies, arguably his *Lysistrata* receives the most attention in modern media and reception. Most notably, Spike Lee's 2015 film *Chi-Raq* takes the anti-war sex-strike of the Greek women and sets it in modern-day Chicago ("Chi-Raq"), which is plagued by gang-related gun violence. References to *Lysistrata* and the play have also been frequent in news reports of the last few decades, as activists like Leymah Gbowee in Liberia (2003) have been labeled as modern-day *Lysistratas* (see the sample of news articles linked below, with stories from Colombia, Kenya, South Korea, etc.). Such modern engagements with Aristophanes' work can illuminate our understanding of the ancient text (as, e.g., Stark 2018 shows), and are often enthusiastically welcomed by a field that regularly feels pressure to remain "relevant" (Morales 2013:294). However, at times, our enthusiasm keeps us from noting critically important details such as genre and context. Stark (2018), for example, effectively uses Lee's adaptation as a lens for understanding Aristophanes' play as depicting a renewal ritual that centers on the *oikos*, but fails to address the farcical nature of the comedy and its necessary implications. An essential observation is that Lee's film less explicitly falls into the category of comedy, and therefore requires a different interpretive lens as a more "serious" political commentary. And Morales (2013) has already pointed out astutely that comparisons of modern political activists who threaten and/or enact sex strikes to *Lysistrata* have the unintended consequence trivializing the modern political debate and can even be accompanied by racist and sexist undertones.

This paper focuses on the issue of genre and considers how we might engage with modern receptions of antiquity more critically and responsibly, especially in our classrooms. It is inevitable that students' prior knowledge of one text will color their interpretation of its "modern

version,” and vice versa, depending on the student’s prior engagements with ancient texts, modern texts, and media. As classicist scholars, we often read the modern “text” *after* we read the ancient text and use the former to reevaluate our reading of the latter, but this is not always the sequence of events for our students. The classroom, therefore, can be a fruitful space for critically assessing our assumptions and interpretations. For Aristophanes’ plays, the added complexity of its generic context and supposed intentions of the playwright require caution and careful acknowledgment of any connections we make between the ancient and modern “texts”. What, for example, is supposed to be funny about Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, and how does this affect its connection to a modern adaptation or reference? With reflections from a student-led panel discussion on Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* and *Chi-Raq* on our campus this past semester, this paper considers how we can leverage the diverse background experiences of our students for a more ethical and careful reading of both the ancient and modern “texts” that takes proper account of context and genre.

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