

Courtesans Reconsidered: Women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*

Scholarship on Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* over the last three decades has almost without exception supported the view that the play depicts the sex-striking wives as hetaeras (Henderson 1987: 177; 2000; 2002; Stroup 2003: 41; Faraone 2006; and Gilhuly 2008: 154). While this reading has enriched our understanding of the play, it begs a more thorough consideration. As Henderson states, "Just how much overlap in the status of, and contact between, hetaeras and wives there actually was, notionally and physically, is a question that deserves more study" (Henderson 2002: 83). This paper argues that the play requires us to view the younger women not as hetaeras but rather as respectable citizen wives. The domestic setting of the sex strike and the close connection of female sexuality with reproduction signify their status as wives, not prostitutes. Indeed, the play portrays desiring and desirable wives as a necessary component of marriage and its aim, the production of legitimate children. In this respect, it reflects the aspects of the "discourse of the oikos" — the idealization of women and their contributions to the household in both literary and visual sources— at its height during the Peloponnesian war (Osborne 1997; Bundrick 2008: 328).

Visual depictions of domestic life on Attic pottery from the last half of the fifth century BCE, particularly scenes of textile production and wedding preparations, provide valuable parallels not previously considered for insight into the representation of women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. Images of women engaged in feminine activities such as wool working, dressing and bathing, primarily in the company of other women in an imaginary domestic space, proliferate during this period. Often these scenes are infused with eroticism, evoked by female accouterments such as sashes, sandals, handlooms, mirrors, perfumes and even occasional nudity.

The domesticated sexuality of the female figures in these nuptial and domestic contexts advertises attractiveness of wives rather than alludes to commercial sex (Bundrick 2008: 303-5).

Much like the visual tableaux of women at home, Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* constructs a notional domestic space in the opening scene appropriate to displays of female sexuality. The explicit sexual allusions of the women should not be viewed as "incompatible with any public expression of the social category of wife" (Stroup 2003: 41), but rather as the bawdy conversation of women alone. Similarly, the female weapons of the sex strike, "little saffron gowns and perfume and slippers and rouge and transparent gowns" (τὰ κροκατίδια καὶ τὰ μύρα καὶ περιβαρίδες / χῆγχουσα καὶ τὰ διαφανῆ χιτῶνια, 46-7), comprise common forms of wifely adornment geared at attracting husbands rather than the lavish accoutrements of the hetaera (Dalby 2002: 114; Glazebrook 2009).

This sexual allure serves an explicit purpose—the production of legitimate children—as indicated by the numerous references to children throughout the play (18, 99, 590, 748, 877, 879, 880, 883, 907, 909). By defining the women as mothers who bear children not only for their husbands but also to serve as soldiers for the city (τεκοῦσαι κάκπέμψασαι παῖδας ὀπλίτας, 589-90; cf. ἄρρεν παιδίον . . . χαλκίον . . . κοῖλον, 748-50), the play further distinguishes them from hetaeras, who cannot bear legitimate children or citizens ([Dem.] 59.122; Isaeus 3.15). This is abundantly clear in Myrrhine's seduction of Cinesias in which the extraordinary physical presence of the baby crying between the two parents (μαμμία, μαμμία, μαμμία, 879) negates the idea of a brothel transaction, reinforcing instead the importance of procreative, conjugal sex stimulated by a sexy wife. The arrival of Cinesias with baby in tow symbolically reconstructs the family unit that has been threatened by war, underscoring the necessity of its continuation for the welfare of the polis.

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