

The Child of Leda and the Conclusion of *Lysistrata*

Lysistrata ends as the “Child of Leda” escorts choruses of men and women off stage:

ἀγείται δ' ἅ Λήδας παῖς

ἀγνὰ χοραγὸς εὐπρεπής. 1315 (Reverman, 2006, 236-260; Henderson, 1987, 91f; 218ff; Sommerstein, 1990, xvii)

The “Child of Leda” is, of course, Helen. But in the context of a recurrent theme of this play, the child is also Lysistrata herself, linked by clear similarities with and distinct differences from her Homeric paradigm.

Helen is mentioned in Lysistrata. Shortly after Lysistrata has disclosed the rough outline of her plan for a sex strike, her Spartan ally Lampito reminds her (and others) of a prior time when sexual excitement resulted in the cessation of war:

ὁ γῶν Μενέλαος τᾶς Ἑλένας τὰ μᾶλ' ἀπαρτὸν 155

γυμναῖς παραῖδων ἐξέβαλ', οἰῶ, τὸ ξίφος. (Henderson, 1980, 179))

Famous as the episode is, it recurs here – but with a significant difference. Lysistrata’s plot succeeds, after all, not because of one woman’s beauty (or strategic use of it) but because of many women, and from many parts of the Greek world. She is as Panhellenic in her clever means and in her ultimate goal as Helen was in her impact (Gumpert, 2001, 97). The beautiful weaver, lover of clothing and sex, wise in her knowledge of oracles, and attentive to “reputation” who started a war now becomes a beautiful weaver, lover of clothing and of sex, wise in her knowledge of oracles and attentive to “reputation” who ends one-- for the sake of all women, not just one. (Gumpert, 2001. 5f; Whitman, 1994. 200-216; Lewis, 1955, 1-7)

It is thus a Helen-based *Lysistrata* who escorts the choruses off stage, thereby underscoring that it will take an epic-scaled effort to end a war, now in its 20th year, of epic-sized, social, political, and cultural importance.

The rich Homeric paradigm adds its own flavor to the boisterousness of the comedy and to its delineation of multiple issues. But as important, it furthers the legacy of Helen herself. As Austin has noted, just one year prior to *Lysistrata*, Euripides had "reinvented" the Helen story for production of *Helen* at the Dionysia. But he had avoided any direct mention of the on-going war with Sparta (Austin, 1994, 136-203). For his part, it is tempting to suggest that Aristophanes reinvents – and indeed reinvents the reinvention – in *Lysistrata* and includes Helen in his approach to the war.

There is another dimension of this focus on Helen in *Lysistrata*. At the same festival at which Aristophanes produced *Lysistrata*, he also produced *Thesmophoriazusae*, a play in which Helen (and Andromeda) are employed to mock Euripides. If the explicit and implicit allusions to *Helen* help with the light-hearted Helen and the equally light-hearted and humorous *Thesmophoriazusae*, in *Lysistrata*, they are more powerful and poignant.

The Child of Leda helps the fantasy conclude, but in doing so (and in the "reinvention" that the nomenclature suggests) calls to mind the turmoil which the war has occasioned: a turmoil that is so without end that a reminder of its beginning (Helen) is now necessary. In true Aristophanic fashion, the child of Leda helps the playwright comment on the mythic tradition, on his rival's work, and on a painful and endless war.

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