

## Something Old, Something Lewd: Depictions of Old Women in *Lysistrata*

The young women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* do not typically use obscene vocabulary among a mixed-gender audience. McClure 1999, for instance, notes that while *Lysistrata* utters the majority of the obscenities in the play, these are all addressed to a female-only audience. The same cannot be said for the older women, however. Throughout their interactions with men in the play, the old women of *Lysistrata* demonstrate an exceptional ability to use coarse language and vulgarities in a plethora of contexts. The proclivity of older women to use obscenity in mixed company has been well documented by scholars (e.g. Henderson 1987; O'Higgins 2003). I argue that a further distinction, based on use of obscenity and addressee, can be made between two different groups of old women in the *Lysistrata*: the chorus, and the trio appearing in lines 439-448. The distinction between the chorus and the trio further elevates the status of the choral women as the moral leaders of the city.

Concerning each group's use of obscenity, we see a distinction between the usage of primary and secondary obscenity. Henderson identifies primary obscenities as terms that directly refer to sexual or scatological organs and acts (Henderson 1991). Secondary obscenities, on the other hand, refer only obliquely to these subjects. The chorus engages entirely in secondary obscenities, preferring to use elaborate euphemisms for sexual body parts and acts rather than refer to them directly. For example, during one of the exchanges between the split choruses of old men and women, the men refer to the women's genitalia using the euphemistic term *σάκανδρος*. The chorus of old women's reply avoids referring to their genitalia directly, instead only pointing indirectly (*αὐτόν*) to the male chorus' euphemism (825-828).

The chorus' restraint from using primary obscenities in their threats against the old men stands in stark contrast to the trio's violent and obscene threats against the Proboulos' archers

(439-448). For instance, the first woman in the trio uses the term χέζω, a primary obscenity meaning, “to shit” (440). This term is marked additionally by its reference to excretion; old women typically employ sexual rather than scatological humor and obscenity in their speech (McClure 1999). The chorus conversely designates its status as elite, moral guides of the city multiple times during the play through their characterization and various indications of their elite activities (e.g. their representation as saviors of the city during the parodos, as Faraone 1997 has argued, and the mention of their participation in several elite cults, 641-7).

The trio is further distinguished from the chorus by their addressee, the Scythian archers. No other female character addresses the archers; the Proboulos is the only character to do so. Scythian archers are ridiculed both in the *Lysistrata* (e.g. 184; 426-7) and the *Thesmophoriazusae* (e.g. 1199-1201; 1098-1104) for their ignorance, thick accents, and fascination with pathetic humor (McClure 1999; Hall 2006). Aristophanes’ mockery of the archers emphasizes their status both as barbarian and slave, two categories of “other” that, in a surprise twist, the trio assumes for itself. The trio’s address to the archers is a humorous reversal of a normative situation, in which the physically dominant and barbaric Scythian slaves forcibly restrain the weak, older women. Instead, it is the trio who acts violently and aggressively.

Placed next to the chorus, then, the trio’s obscenity and violence remind the audience of the disparities between the two groups and thus the chorus’ exceptional standing. Both the trio’s use of language and their addressee emphasize their lower status. The lower status of the trio then puts into sharper relief the chorus’ elevated status. While the trio is akin to the aggressive, lewd, and boorish Scythian slaves, the chorus stands apart as the moral guides and saviors of Athens in crisis.

## Bibliography

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