

Aristoph.Lys.181-234: a deliberately twisted oath-ritual

My paper proposal addresses Lysistrata's oath-ritual in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (lines 181-234). In more detail, I contend that to appreciate the *vis comica* of this ritual is necessary to understand to what extent Lysistrata's ritual departs from "traditional" oath-rituals and how they were performed in fifth-century Athens and earlier. By carefully twisting all the most notable aspects of an oath-ritual, in fact, Aristophanes demonstrates full mastery of what made such rituals effective.

The first striking feature of the oath-ritual in *Lysistrata* is the gender of the performers. Were Athenian women allowed to actively participate in public sacrifices, regardless of whether oaths were involved? An inscription from Cos, ED 178A(a), testifies to the role played by prospective wives in the slaughter of sacrificial animals. However, the non-Athenian provenance of this inscription should discourage any firm conclusion. On the other hand, our evidence about the sacrifice carried out by the priestesses of Dionysus (Dem.XXIII.68) does not shed a full light on this issue (did Dionysus' priestesses butcher the sacrificial victim?).

A second aspect worth highlighting centers on the paraphernalia employed in the ritual. Why does one of Lysistrata's companions oppose Lysistrata's intention to use a shield during the ritual (lines 189-190)? Concluding that these lines have "the effect of preventing a sacrificial slaughter from being performed on stage" (Sommerstein 1990, ad 190) is too simplistic. This passage hints at Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* (lines 42-8), namely the messenger's account of the oath ritual that was performed before the attack against Thebes and that displayed war paraphernalia: to what the extent, and why, the different purpose of the oath ritual in Aeschylus and that in Aristophanes legitimizes, or not, the employment of weapons as ritual instruments?

The relevance of purpose comes into play also regarding lines 207-211, where Μυρρίνη and Κλεονίκη argue about whether the leader of the ritual, role eventually taken up by Lysistrata, should be designated by election. Faraone (1993) rightly points out that this scene bears witness to the different social status held by Lysistrata and her comrades. Once again, Aristophanes is aware that how oath-rituals are performed reflects the hierarchical dynamics among the participants in the ritual. As suggested by Lougovaya-Ast (2006), in fact, Aristophanes likely named the character of Μυρρίνη after another Μυρρίνη, namely the first priestess of Ἄθηνᾶ Νίκη ever appointed by public election (IG I3 1330 = CEG 93). Additionally, the final νή Δία uttered simultaneously by Lysistrata and her companions binds the entire group to the observance of the oath.

Finally, the attempted slaughter of the sacrificial entity eventually chosen: a jar of Thasian wine. That this passage alludes to Athenian women's propensity for drunkenness (Sommerstein 1990, ad 197) is not fully in tune with Aristophanes' parody of an oath ritual. Instead, I am inclined to see here an allusion to libations performed to seal oaths of allegiance, where the pouring down of the wine symbolized the pouring down of the blood of any potential perjurer of the oath being taken. The "butchery" of the wine jar proves thus a successful detorsio in comicum of that practice of "dramatization", to quote a felicitous expression of Irene Berti (2006, p.285), which lies at the heart of oath-rituals (as several sources, historical and poetic, demonstrate).

In sum, appreciating the dramaturgy of Lys.181-234 is the result of a full understanding of all the references to "orthodox" oath-rituals embedded in these lines. Additionally, what makes this passage suitable for scholars of Greek religion and magic is the "indirect" knowledge that it produces with regard to oath-rituals. By bringing on stage a parodied version of an oath-

ritual, Aristophanes implicitly informs us about what made oath-rituals effective and, to a lesser degree, reveals the religious concepts behind oaths as examples of “performative speech”.

Bibliography

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