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To Protest or Obey  
The Hearth and the Scepter: Women Against the State

by Sean O'Leary

(English 1102)

Women should stay home. To the modern Westerner, such a thought harks back to a pre-feminist era and is nearly regarded as sinful, if not to think then at least to say aloud. However, to the people of ancient Greece, a woman's place was utterly and totally separate from men. Relegated to function almost exclusively at home and legally regarded as eternal minors, women nevertheless appeared as some of the most famous and central characters in Greek theater. The titular heroines of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and Sophocles' *Antigone* emerge as unusually strong and willful women, but *Lysistrata* is more successful than her peer and is better suited to combating the men who stand in her way. Though the two heroines share numerous qualities, the ample differences between them not only distinguish them from each other but ultimately lead one to a comedic resolution and the other to a tragic one.

The first and greatest similarity between *Lysistrata* and *Antigone* lies simply in that they are both women. To a modern audience, their sex and gender might not have immediate implications, but it certainly did for the original audience through stereotypes and establishing motivation. Greek women of the time were charged with caring for the *oikos*, the home and the inner domain separate from the *polis*, the larger society and outer domain of Greek life. The *oikos* itself functioned almost as their own states to “produce the necessities of life, care for its aged, raise the next generation, and care for its dead ancestors” (Shaw 256). Women, therefore, were obligated to establish and cultivate harmony, keeping the *oikos* in order. *Lysistrata* and *Antigone* were expected by their societies and, particularly, by the men around them, to mind the *oikos* through womanly virtue.

However, both of them go far above and beyond these expectations, *Lysistrata* by interfering with and *Antigone* by disregarding the authority of men in the *polis*. In this, it appears that both women have lost some large measure of their femininity. Indeed, *Antigone*'s own sister reminds her that “we are women, we're not born to contend with men” (Sophocles 74-75), making it clear to any audience that her willful disobedience in light of Creon's decree is highly unusual, perhaps even abhorrent. Both *Lysistrata* and *Antigone* disrupt the order of the *polis* not because it harms them overtly, but because circumstances created by men have intruded upon the sanctity of the *oikos* and thus into the domain of women. They rise up not for personal power, wealth, or fame as would be befitting of a Greek man, but for the sanctity of the home as would characterize a Greek woman, as “the mother of children, the keeper and manager of [the] home” (Seltman 120).

The exact nature of the offense differs between the two women, a division which later causes problems for the ill-fated *Antigone* as her own story progresses. *Lysistrata* sees Athen's continued participation in war as being dangerous and destructive at home. She supports this claim first through jokes about women remaining sexually unfulfilled while their husbands are at war, but the silver bullet of her argument rests on her assertion that “a woman's not in bloom for long, and if she isn't taken quickly she won't be taken at all” (Aristophanes 597-598). *Lysistrata* expounds the common wisdom that any woman left past her prime is unlikely to marry, which limits her ability to maintain the *oikos* through not having legitimate children and completely strips her of any chance to indirectly influence the *polis* through her husband, as women were not afforded the rights of citizens in Athens. Her argument is at its strongest when centered around this claim that the men are harming Athens itself by letting maidens grow into maids without husbands, and it proves difficult for the men to

refute. In fact, the magistrate makes no attempt to challenge Lysistrata's central argument and is on the verge of suggesting that the men in town would "take one of those women as a concubine" (Sommerstein 231). As illegitimate children were as powerless as women, this potential solution would do little to alleviate the women's lack of influence in the political sphere. Lysistrata's argument is met with no convincing counter, demonstrating her levels of debate to be on par with if not over that of the men.

Antigone, likewise, expounds that her own behavior is to protect and properly care for dead ancestors through performing burial rituals for her brother Polyneices. She famously argues that her duty to her mother, a member of Creon's own family, drove her to disobey his edict as there would be no further brothers to mourn (Sophocles 1000). However, she also attempts a more direct argument with Creon before being condemned by calling his authority into question. Antigone supports her position by stating that "It wasn't Zeus...who made this proclamation...nor did Justice" (Sophocles 499-501). This position, though correct, is perceived by Creon as an attack on his authority not by the gods but by Antigone herself, going so far as to say that bending to her would emasculate him (Sophocles 541-542). This blow to Creon's identity as a man and, by extension, a competent ruler coupled with his different interpretation of the gods' orders blinds him to Antigone's logic and she presents little else in the way of support.

While both demonstrate some level of reasoning by being able to justify their actions, Lysistrata tempers her boldness and assertiveness with prudence; she is exceedingly careful and cunning in how she carries out her will when she fights on the unfamiliar social battlefield of men. Her caution manifests clearly when she refuses to go alone. Lysistrata seems fully aware that alone she is powerless in the *polis*, but that a collection of dissident voices are strong enough to stand: "if all the women join together...then united we can save Greece" (Aristophanes 39-41). Lysistrata further unites the women she calls under her banner, first with the sacred oath and then again with an oracle. Though Lysistrata brings the women together to stop war, it should be noted that she essentially builds her own army for the purpose, one that engages the men in a brief scuffle at her command (Aristophanes 460). Lysistrata shows her ability to plan and lead, typically masculine qualities in Athens, and again reaffirms her capability to deal with men on their own plane.

Antigone has no such foresight and, indeed, seems to be ruled by impulse and emotion through the duration of the play. Similarly to Lysistrata, she makes an attempt at securing help by going to Ismene, but she is the only person whom Antigone turns to for assistance before foolishly disregarding Creon's decree. As Haemon later reveals, both he and the people of Thebes support Antigone, believing that "she deserves a glowing crown of gold" (Sophocles 782). Their support is rendered useless by Antigone's refusal to seek it out before condemning and resigning herself to death, all of which serve to highlight Antigone's stark lack of foresight when compared to Lysistrata. In fact, it is Antigone's impulsive nature which creates the dire situation that ends in her death. Were Antigone to be as careful or cunning as Lysistrata, her conflict with Creon might have been entirely avoided by approaching him about the decree before acting on her rebellious thoughts.

Not only do they differ in how they handle threats and their allies, but also in how they handle themselves in the alien world of men. Lysistrata seems to be perfectly adapted to larger society by having her plan together from start to finish before she begins to enact it. When pressured by the magistrate to offer her take on how society should be run, a male only process in ancient Athens if there ever was one, Lysistrata calmly and thoroughly puts forth her famous wool-weaving metaphor. Though her model is disregarded out of hand by the sexist magistrate, it is remarkably similar to a utopian, idealistic system of politics: the dung is washed out, the villains are removed, the corrupt cliques disbanded, and everyone is given a voice (Aristophanes 575-587). These tenants are familiar to modern readers through rehabilitative prison systems, political watchdog groups, anti-corruption laws, and more inclusive if less direct forms of democracy than Athens functioned under. The current state of much of the developed world is, truly, more similar to Lysistrata's wool-schema

than Athens at the time; she is significantly ahead of her time. And she draws on knowledge related directly to the *oikos* she is familiar with, further blurring the distinction between men and women in an effort to emerge victorious.

Antigone, on the other hand, shows a critical ignorance of how best to deal with Creon. Particularly, rather than embracing feminine powers of manipulation like Lysistrata, Antigone embodies only the rash, emotional side of women. Further, she is unable to adapt her abilities the way Lysistrata does. Antigone, representing the *oikos*, stands against Creon and his *polis*, but is hampered by her “refusal to recognize how each depends on the other, [which] leads to disaster for all” (Saxonhouse 65). Lysistrata imagines that the two systems are similar, if not virtually the same, but Antigone's actions are guided by the misinterpretation that one cannot understand or abide the other, leading to failure when her arguments make no mention of how Creon's decree might be harming the *polis* as a whole, a point Haemon has to make in her stead when he indicates that Creon is acting selfishly rather than considering Thebes as a whole (Sophocles 820-827). Antigone, while she shows an admirable strength of will, is unable to produce these extra lines of thought herself, again showing her maladaptation to dealing with men.

Additionally, both women are the recipients of divine intervention, but Antigone again mishandles her favor and only worsens her own position. Antigone's gift is quite obvious; the sudden emergence of a dust storm when she returns to Polyneices body a second time (Sophocles 464-478). While the guards are blinded, she is afforded an opportunity to flee and not risk capture for violating Creon's law twice, but she chooses to perform the burial rites once more and is caught in the process, facilitating her eventual imprisonment and death. The nature of the coincidence and her numerous invocations of Zeus, god of the heavens, make it relatively clear that a higher power interceded on Antigone's behalf for her own protection, but she makes this a lost cause.

Divine intervention in *Lysistrata* is both more subtle and more symbolic. Rather than benefit from some happy accident of nature, Lysistrata and the other women consistently invoke numerous goddesses through speech: Hecate, Cybele, Artemis, Athena, and particularly Aphrodite, all of whom have reputations for protecting women. Lysistrata's plan could be considered to be supported directly by Aphrodite given the complete, lustful breakdown of the men around her in an unnaturally short window of time (Sommerstein 136). Lysistrata uses the Acropolis of Athens, high temple to Athena, as her base of operations, and it is here that the women manage to stay as celibate as the virgin goddess they worship. Her goals can be conflated with Athena's domain as a form of defensive warfare to protect the *oikos* from further harm and, strikingly, she is wearing the aegis of Athena when she enters the orchestra for the last time, indicating that she has fully taken on the role of high priestess if not of that of the goddess on Earth.

As the plays reach their ultimate conclusions, they reach diametrically opposed outcomes. Lysistrata enjoys the creation of peace in Athens, Sparta, and perhaps all of Greece through her bloodless and intelligently waged warfare against a male-dominated society. Antigone, though she manages to complete her original goal of burying her brother, takes her life after failing to convince Creon of the justice inherent in her actions, her fight neither totally bloodless or wholly intelligent by any means. Though both women fight for the preservation of harmony within the *oikos*, they are quick to diverge paths from one another and Lysistrata shows that her prudence, flexibility, and wit is stronger than Antigone's passion, righteousness, and stubbornness. While neither was a perfect model for women's behavior, Lysistrata was saved by her devotion to protecting peace while Antigone was condemned by overthrowing authority.

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