

The question of gender stratification in *lysistrata*



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On the surface, the play *Lysistrata* could appear to be a light-hearted comedy about a group of women who decide to refuse sex to the Greek men in order to end the Peloponnesian war. However, inside of this humor there exists a dangerous, hidden transcript: by refusing sex to the men and demanding the end of the war, the women are challenging the pre-existing patriarchal power structures in ways that were unheard of in Ancient Greece. In order to maintain their hegemony, the men try to assert their dominance by any means they can, including, in a very animalistic manner, demonstrating that they smell much worse than women and by taking off their clothes to show off their masculinity. Throughout the play, the men and women of Greece fight for power, and Aristophanes conveys this power struggle by using the sense of smell, by demonstrating that the differences between genders are entirely fictional, and by use of the image of the “woman on top.”

The men want to show off the way that they smell bad in order to assert their dominance over women in the Choral Debate on pages 66-68. However, the women reveal that they smell just as bad so that they can maintain the power they have already seized by refusing to have sex. The men’s leader says, “a man’s gotta smell like a man from the word go,” (67). The men wish to separate themselves from the women because they feel threatened by the power that *Lysistrata* and the other women have seized by refusing to have sex. However, the difference in smell between genders does not exist. On page 48 when the women from Sparta arrive, *Lysistrata* and *Kalonike* comment on how badly they smell, saying that they are “From Dungstown.” In addition, after the men take off their clothes to reveal their smell, the

women respond by saying, “ a woman’s got to smell like a woman” (67) and they take off their clothes to reveal their smell as well. In a very animalistic manner the two genders try to grapple for power and dominance by demonstrating the way that they smell. So, it becomes clear that men and women are not differentiated from each other by their stench, because they both attempt to use this smell to establish their dominance. Despite the fact that the men wish for their gender to give them the right to rule over women, they are unable to accomplish this because there are no gendered differences in the way men and women smell in *Lysistrata*.

The way that men and women do not smell different, and the way that they take off their clothes to reveal comical bodysuits instead of nudity, demonstrates the way Aristophanes portrays gender and gendered power structures as fictional.[1] The men’s leader says, “ Let’s doff our shirts, ‘ cause a man’s gotta smell like a man from the word go and shouldn’t be all wrapped up like souvlaki” (67). The way the he says that they must smell “ from the word go,” means that the men feel they must always be ready to assert their patriarchal dominance. However, this dominance and the gender binary is fictitious and is created by culture, a fact that Aristophanes draws attention to by having the women wear very similar bodysuits. The women’s leader says, “ Let’s also take off our tunics; a woman’s gotta smell like a woman, mad enough to bite!” (67). Here the women use very similar language as the men did when they took off there clothes, and they use very aggressive language in order to maintain the power that they have gained by refusing to have sex with the men. The humorous aspect of this is that they are both trying to establish their dominance by displaying their naked

bodies and their stench. This exemplifies the safe, releasing nature of humor. However, there is also a dangerous, hidden transcript: both genders are revealing the same thing to each other—the exact same odors and bodies, which threatens the gender binary. In this way Aristophanes challenges the patriarchal power structures of Greece by suggesting that the two genders are more similar to each other than cultural and gender roles want them to be.

The men in the chorus feel threatened by the idea of women literally and figuratively “on top,” and they are so hyperaware of this threat to their power that they can “smell” (66) this “tyranny” from a distance. At the beginning of the choral debate, the men announce that, “I think I smell much bigger trouble in this, a definite whiff of Hippias’ tyranny” (66). Jeffrey Henderson states, “there is an allusion here to the ‘equestrian’ position in sexual intercourse (woman on top)” (221). The image of the woman on top comes up throughout the work, and was a more taboo sex position during this time.[2] This image has multiple implications in the context of this work. First, the allusion to a taboo sex position suggests that what the women are doing—seizing power by refusing to have sex at all—is in itself a taboo act. Second, the image of the woman on top conjures up the idea of women figuratively on top of the power structures of Ancient Greece. So, this predominant image suggests that not only are women trying to seize power, but that they may actually be trying to flip the power structures upside down and dismantle the patriarchy completely. The men are so suspicious of these actions and the threat of the woman on top to their beloved patriarchy that they can smell these power-hungry women from far away. Thus, we see that

the characters' senses of smell and the image of the woman on top are profoundly connected to the power structures.

When Lysistrata and the Greek women refused to have sex with the Greek men until they end the Peloponnesian war, they ignite a power struggle that is portrayed in the play through the sense of smell, the examination of the fallacy of the gender binary, and the image of the woman on top. The men wish to show off their masculine, smelly bodies in order to assert their dominance. However, the women contend that their bodies are just as smelly and aren't very different from those of the men. This, of course, reveals that gender and gendered power structures are fictional and imposed by society. In addition to the examination of gender, there are also multiple references to the image of "the woman on top." The men in the play feel threatened by this sex position because they are wary of women being on top of the power structure of Greece, and they want to maintain their hegemony. Though it is unclear in the end whether men or women come out on top in the end, Aristophanes effectively portrays the way that both genders vie for power despite the fact that gender is fictional.

[1] The idea that the bodysuits show that gender is fictional was discussed in class and is not my original idea. [2] The idea that this was a taboo sex act was discussed in class.