

Lysistrata: the Ritual Logic of the Sex-strike

by Camilla Power

(Lecturer in Anthropology, University of East London)

Aristophanes, born about 450BC, was at the height of his powers during the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. His three comedies of sexual subversion — *Λυσιστρατη* (Lysistrata), *Θεσμοφοριαζουσαι* (Thesmophoriazousai) and *Ἐκκλησιαζουσαι* (Ekklesiazousai) — are the remaining examples of what may have been a traditional 'feminist' or gynocratic theme in Old Athenian Comedy. In this paper I intend to show, with particular reference to Lysistrata, that there is a ritual logic inherent in the structure of these plays, and in the myths, rites and cults to which they allude. Such logic, I would suggest, is derived from a very ancient template, the influence of which persisted in Greek women's ritual culture down to Aristophanes' time.

The theme – Γυναικοκρατία

The idea of women performing roles of men, i.e. taking part in the business of the *πολις* (polis) as opposed to that of the *οἶκος* (oikos), the sphere of domestic management, seems to have been inherently comic to the Greek citizen of Aristophanes' Athens. The only public sphere of activity open to women was ritual and sacerdotal.

That the male audience's laughter would have been, to an extent, a nervous release, channelling anxieties about male status, can be deduced from the traditional theme of *γυναικοκρατία* — rule of women — in Greek myth and art. We have, for example, the battles fought with the Amazons at the heart of Athens celebrated in the Parthenon friezes — in na, a goddess herself Amazon at heart; the myths of the temple of Ath Danaiids, and of the Lemnian women, archetypal figures of female rebellion, indeed of sex-strike.

Women's Festivals

Besides its expression in myth, such unease on the part of male citizens would surely have been felt during women's separatist rites and festivals. At these abnormal times, sanctioned by ancestral tradition, women collectively occupied a public, ritual space outside the *oikos*, giving vent to their legendary potential for defiance and subversiveness.

In his essay on the place of sacrifice at Thesmophoria, *The Violence of Well-born Ladies*, Marcel Detienne (1989) stresses the sexual-political implications of women organising and carrying out public sacrifice. The celebrants set up a 'city of women' autonomous in the midst of the male city — in fact, a city of tents close to the site of the Assembly on the *Πνυξ* (Pnyx). Normal (male) political business was suspended for the three-day duration of the festival. Men's uneasiness at their exclusion Detienne finds illustrated in legendary anecdotes of male attempts to spy on the women's secret rituals, and the women's response of righteous but lethal fury. This tension of what is at the same time secret and public underscores the horrifying ambivalence to the Greek male imagination of women — fertile and menstruating women — wielding the instruments of blood-sacrifice in ritual 'essential to the reproduction of the city of men' (1989: 139). Alluding to the role of menstruation at Thesmophoria, Detienne (1989: 147) writes:

'even before the sacrifice, blood flows ritually in the Thesmophoria, evoking with the blood shed as the animal is killed the distress at seeing the blood of life that fecundates mix in the same body with the blood of death and war.'

Thesmophoriazusai enacts such a fantasy of male infiltration into the women's ritual stronghold, the temple of Demeter Thesmophoros. Thesmophoria, held in autumn at the time of sowing, was one of the most venerable women-only rites in Greek culture. Its atavistic practices included hurling pigs into snake-filled crevices, and strict observance of sexual abstinence, i.e. sex-strike, whilst lying on beds strewn with the menstrual herb agnus castus. The three days culminated in the blood-rite and spreading on the fields of the decayed, but consecrated, remnants of the sacrificial pigs. According to Herodotus (2.171), the rites of Thesmophoria were introduced to Greece, at Argos, by those arch-female rebels and sex-strikers, the Danaids.

Ekklesiazusai, one of Aristophanes' later plays written after the War, depicts events arising out of a conspiracy of women entered into at the Skira — another women's festival antagonistic to men. This fell at midsummer, the end of the Athenian year, marked by a period of general licence and dissolution of the normal order. It was an exceptional time for women, one of the few days when they were sanctioned to leave the isolation of their quarters. Gathering at a special female shrine 'according to ancestral custom', they formed their own organisation, sacrificed and feasted at men's expense. The Attic historian Philochoros (quoted by Burkert 1983: 145 n.42) noted that they ate garlic in large quantities, so as to avoid sex and be odious to men. Walter Burkert (1983: 193) sees this part of the ritual as analogous to rites performed by the women on Lemnos, commemorating 'the crime of the Lemnian women against the men'.

The earliest play, *Lysistrata*, was not attached to a particular festival. Yet it is richly allusive to the whole mythic-ritual complex of Greek women's religion. *Lenaia*, the winter wine festival at which it was first performed, probably included women's maenadic, that is Dionysiac, activity at Athens.

Athena and the Akropolis

The central setting, all-important to the plot of *Lysistrata*, is the Akropolis. This, the high citadel of Athens, is consecrated to the goddess Athena, the city deity, most especially in her venerable form of Ἀθηνᾶ Πολίας (Athena Polias). The theme of chastity as a means to empowerment for women has been recurrent in discussions on Women and Sovereignty. It forms one of the chief attributes of Athena, the image of the chaste warrior goddess — Παρθένος in Greek — powerful through her independence from males. Athena was largely assimilated to the patriarchy. Nevertheless, she preserved under her goatskin aegis much archaic women's ritual.

At the opening of the play, *Lysistrata* appears in front of the Propylaea, the gateway to the Akropolis. She paces restlessly, waiting for the women to turn up at the meeting she has called to discuss the salvation of Greece. Her neighbour Kalonike hurries up first, and wonders how women can think of anything sensible, sitting at home, spending all their time prettifying themselves. 'These are just the things that are going to save us!', says *Lysistrata* (l.46). And she details: τε κροκωτίδια - little saffron tunics; τε μύρα - perfumes; ἄι περιβαρίδες - dainty slippers; ἔγχουσα - rouge; and διαφανή χιτώνια - see-through nighties, especially the διαφανή χιτώνια. When all the wives have gathered, including representatives of the Spartans and the enemy allies, *Lysistrata* elaborates on the strategy of the strike (ll.149-154):

"We're at home, all made up, in our sheerest negligés from Amorgos, parading around with nothing underneath, our triangles neatly plucked, and when our husbands are good

and stiff, dying to screw, we don't go near them, but absolutely refuse; they'll soon make peace, you'll see."

Aristophanes deftly skirts an essential contradiction in his plot: how do the wives make a sex-strike at home hurt husbands who are actually away fighting? In their absence, the wives are full of complaint about the wartime shortage of Milesian dildoes, let alone men! Aristophanes' solution is to have the women occupy public space, making a 'home' out of the Akropolis, and taking control of the treasury of Athena as though it were the housekeeping money.

At a stroke, Aristophanes moves the action from the private sphere of sex-strike and withdrawal of conjugal services in the home, into the political arena of Athens where the crucial question is posed: Should the War go on? 'In effect', as Jeffrey Henderson puts it in introducing his edition of *Lysistrata* (1987: xxxiv),

'Lysistrata converts the Akropolis into a household for all the female citizens. Its exclusivity turns the tables on the men, who have excluded their wives from the process of policy-making.'

In the language of ethnography, the Akropolis becomes a 'women's house' under the aegis of Athena. Sex-strike in this context becomes a forceful, active, collective means to 'empowerment through chastity'.

The Sex-strike Logic

Women at Thesmophoria, said Diodorus (5.4.7), 'imitate the ancient way of life.' Menstrual ritual apparently stood central to this 'way of life'. Independently, such male authorities as Karl Kerényi, Burkert and Detienne have viewed Thesmophoria structurally as a ritual of synchronised menstruation. In the words of Kerényi (1975: 157): 'The Thesmophoria were nothing else but the periods of Greek women elevated to an annual festival.' To Kerényi's comparison of 'the seclusion of the women in an uneasy atmosphere of blood and sexuality with the taboos on menstruating women in many primitive cultures,' Burkert (1985: 245) responded:

'Naturally this striking connection does not imply the biological miracle of a collective menstruation in some primitive age; but perhaps experiences and behaviour connected with menstruation could have provided the model for the ritual structure of an annual festival in which women assure themselves of their own peculiar nature, denied to men.'

He goes on: 'At the core of the festival there remains the dissolution of the family, the separation of the sexes, and the constitution of a society of women.'

In recent publications, the anthropologist Chris Knight (1983, 1987) has made clear that the 'biological miracle' which Burkert found so difficult to conceive is not in fact so improbable. Knight's model, which I will outline briefly, affords a plausible evolutionary framework within which to conceptualise the emergence of rituals such as those I have touched on here.

Burkert opens his chapter on ritual and oath-sacrifice (1983: 35) with the following:

'Hunting behaviour became established and, at the same time, transferable through ritualization. In this way it was preserved long after the time of the primitive hunter...These rituals were indispensable because of the particular thing they accomplished. The only prehistoric and historic groups obviously able to assert themselves were those held together by the ritual power to kill. The earliest male

societies banded together for collective killing in the hunt. Through solidarity, and cooperative organization, and by establishing an inviolable order, the sacrificial ritual gave society its form.'

This is the precise converse of Knight's sex-strike theory. Knight sees the premise for human solidarity, including male solidarity, in female solidarity attained through menstrual synchrony, the primal rituals of human culture being used to celebrate and reinforce this. For evolutionary reasons — Knight argues — it was women who needed to establish 'an inviolable order' interdicting rape and undermining the primate norm of male dominance and haphazard violence. Their weapon was the collective sex-strike. Blood, menstrual blood and the blood of game animals, killed at the due time with due respect, became taboo, identified ritually and symbolically as the same. Burkert's view that sacrificial ritual gave society its form is an inverse expression of the view that menstrual ritual gave society its form, and that the first model for sacrifice lay in the link between hunting and menstruation.

Discussing the earliest emergence of a sexual division of labour and of human culture as such, Knight argues that the increased reliance on hunting during the last Ice Age must initially have caused women problems. Requiring violence and high levels of mobility, hunting tends to be a male activity. Moreover, nothing in the primate ancestry of human males predisposed them genetically to provision females and offspring with meat. There were two logically possible ways for females to motivate males to provide meat. Firstly, they could prostitute themselves for meat on an individual and competitive basis (as is observed to happen among higher apes). Secondly, they could take collective action and as a collective refuse sex except on provision of meat to the community of women as a whole. Knight argues that in the human case this latter option was adopted, and that language, ritual, kinship and culture emerged out of the gender-solidarity instituted by female action of this kind.

To achieve the necessary solidarity, evolving human females must have become mistresses of their own biology. They lost the period of oestrous, characteristic of most other primates, and replaced it with an ovulatory and menstrual cycle marked by continuous sexual receptivity and heavier menstrual bleeding. Knight draws at this point on the medically documented fact that women who are emotionally and physically close to each other tend to synchronise their cycles, and that (unusually for primates) the average length of our cycles is 29.5 days, the same as the lunar cycle. Women's bleeding, according to Knight, was constructed as a 'no' signal: in effect a declaration of 'sex-strike'.

Women identified their own blood with the blood of game animals as part of their political strategy. This was so as to impose 'menstrual' taboos on raw (that is, bloody) meat. The same blood-taboos that prevented a man from approaching a menstrual woman now also prevented him from eating his own kills raw out in the bush. Men had to return with their meat to camp. There, cooking fires would be lit. As the cooking removed visible blood from the flesh of game so, symbolically, it removed blood from women, permitting sex to take place.

Knight infers that women's action led to the establishment of a lunar-scheduled rhythm of hunting alternating with rest, and that this formed the basis of the cultural construction of gender. Women would withdraw themselves as a menstrual collective at dark moon. During the waxing moon phase of blood, they assume the gender of 'power' or 'solidarity'. No male would be allowed to approach sexually at this time: he had to go out with his hunting-band. At around the time of full moon, successful hunters would return, bringing their kills back to the women's camp.

Women and their lovers now came together. As cooking of the game commenced, 'fire' — the opposite of 'blood' — inaugurated a waning moon phase in which collective power was surrendered so

that marital sex could be enjoyed in privacy. Thus, culture was governed by a cyclical logic of lunar/menstrual time which was in effect (for both females and males) an alternation between 'power' and 'surrender' gender-states. Society alternated repeatedly between a waxing moon, 'sovereignty-wielding' phase of blood, 'incestuous' kinship and fasting; and a waning moon, 'sovereignty-surrendering' phase of fire, 'marital' sex and feasting.

I now want to take this scientific 'myth' of a Paleolithic sex-strike, and see how the logic it generates compares with the ritual logic encoded in Aristophanes' famous drama of a Panhellenic sex-strike against war, *Lysistrata*.

Old Attic Comedy at the Festivals of Dionysos

The form and purpose of Classical Athenian comedy can be seen as a ritual legacy of a cyclical logic, with a gender-phase of 'power/solidarity' followed by a phase of 'surrender/division'. Intrinsic to Old Attic comedy, with its origins in Dionysiac festivity, are themes, formalised and ritualised, of role-reversal, frequently with ritual transvestism — found particularly in all three of Aristophanes' women's plays.

In the setting of Dionysos' dramatic festival, comic playwrights competed in presenting a 'monde renversé', where the little man, or in these cases the little women (necessarily in the plural) get their own back, achieve a temporary and fantastic empowerment. By the end, 'normal' order is restored, but within the play the logic of inversion/subversion is enacted. As *Lysistrata* herself puts it in the mock-oracle she pronounces to boost the morale of the strike-breaking wives:

τά ὄ"υπέριτερα νέριτερα θήσει (l.772)

what was above will be placed below i.e. turned topsy-turvy,

naturally taken by the wives in Aristophanes in a sexual sense:

Ἐπάνω κατακεισόμεθ' ἡμεῖς; (l.773)

so we get to lie on top?

Ritual and mythic content of the plot of *Lysistrata*

I will pick out three essential ritual episodes in *Lysistrata* — the scene of the Oath; the fight between the two halves of the chorus; and the scene of role-reversal and transvestism in the *agōn*. All these episodes fall into the first half of the play. Each one shows women collectively in a ritually powerful position — enjoying sovereignty, in effect. Men invade the latter half of the play and women, having achieved their objectives, are induced to surrender their power and depart their separate ways to each private *oikos*.

The Oath

The wives assume sovereignty when they seal their conspiracy with the Oath (ll.181-239). No longer deferring to men, they take responsibility for the whole of Greece into their own hands. I contend that the ceremony the wives perform, symbolic of their solidarity in the sex-strike, is also symbolically menstrual.

Burkert's remarks (above) on the ritualisation of hunting behaviour are especially pertinent to oath-sacrifice. In *Lysistrata* a mock-ritual of this kind is performed. Burkert (1985: 250) writes:

'In the institution of the oath, religion, morality, and the very organization of society appear indissolubly linked together. Its function is to guarantee that a statement is absolutely binding...In a culture without writing where there are no records to act as proof..this function is of unique importance.'

In the ancient high civilisations, he continues, the written word never displaced this function of the oath which represents the fundamental contract of society.

It is natural, then, that the wives should consolidate their sisterhood by swearing an oath. However, Aristophanes and the wives have a problem in resolving what form the oath should take. An oath-sacrifice demanded blood, but a ceremony for peace should be bloodless, accompanied by drinking of wine (Burkert 1985: 71, 250-4). Aristophanes solves this comically by having the wives 'sacrifice' a large jar of best Thasian vintage, which they refer to as blood, using mock-ritual language of blood-sacrifice. This scene is paralleled in *Thesmophoriazusai* by the farcical 'sacrifice' of the wineskin 'baby' seized by Mnesilochos just as he has been exposed — there the blood-sacrifice represents an integral part of the rites of *Thesmophoria*.

Lysistrata's immediate idea of the sacrifice is decidedly militant, modelled on the warlike, epic practice in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* (l.42ff). She summons a Scythian 'archeress' — a comic, female counterpart to the regular Athenian Scythian policeman — to hold out a shield, upturned, while one of the wives is supposed to hand to *Lysistrata* τε τόμιά. These are the bits cut off the sacrificial victim (occurring in oath-sacrifice only), normally, according to Burkert, meaning the testicles — thus the blood is associated with the genitals. She intends to cut the victim's throat (μηλοσφαγούσας) and pour its blood into the shield.

Kalonike objects 'You can't swear an oath over a shield in a matter concerning peace.' (l.190) *Lysistrata*'s second idea, which meets with universal approval, seems to derive from Scythian custom. In sealing an oath, Scythian men would cut themselves, sprinkle some blood into wine and drink the mixture together out of a ritual cup. *Lysistrata* calls for a large, black cup (κύλιξ), into which they will 'slaughter' (using μηλοσφαγούσαι again) a stoup of best Thasian — a rich, dark wine subject to strict 'appellation contrôlée'. Over this, the women will swear never to mix their wine with water. Each drinks her share.

Highly compressed in Aristophanes' comic vein, what we see is the rejection with *Lysistrata*'s first idea of the warlike, violent 'brotherhood' bond — which must be regarded as derivative of primitive hunting ritual. The women choose the dark colour of the wine and the blood. Triumphantly, they have feminised the blood-rite and restored its original 'menstrual' meaning, symbolic of collective sex-strike. The blood that gives life is, in sisterhood, opposed to the indiscriminate killing of the War, haphazardly violent and disruptive of homelife.

There was a notable oath-taking ceremony at Athens which Aristophanes could have had in mind: this took place among a college of Athenian women called the γεραιραι (Venerable Women), a group of fourteen — the number of days in a waxing moon phase — who swore to their purity before the Basilinna (Queen Archon), especially purity from intercourse with a man. The ritual occurred once a year at the temple of Dionysos in the Marshes at the Anthesteria festival. The marshes of Athens were liminal, a place of traffic with the Underworld. The Anthesteria was itself liminal, the festival of flowers and new wine in early spring, a time of death-in-life when the souls of the dead arise. Dionysos

himself, with his profound and archaic associations in ritual with wine/blood and the raw, sacrificial feast, I would like to hypothesize as a daimōn of the 'blood' phase of ritual power. The whole realm of Dionysiac mythology — his dwelling 'incestuously' dressed as a woman among his womenfolk; his epidemia, the sudden arrivals and departures; his 'lunar' epiphanies to his snake-wreathed wild maenads as bull or hundred-headed serpent (Euripides, *Bakkhai*, l.1017ff.) — all such manifestations may express 'menstrual' power and afflictions. The oath of the γεραιραι was sworn prior to the sacred marriage of the Basilinna with Dionysos in his temple. She performed 'ineffable rites' — ἀρρητα ἱερά — assisted only by the 'Venerable Women'.

The Chorus Fight

The women have barricaded themselves into the Akropolis. The first males appear on stage, the old men, who form one half of the chorus. This use by Aristophanes in *Lysistrata* of semi-choruses, one half old men, the other old women, was unique as far as we know. These halves stage a highly ritualistic fight, the men armed with fire; the women with water. They show staunch gender solidarity and mutual antagonism through most of the play. Among examples of festivals where groups of men and women exchange insults in just such a manner, the most notable was the Athenian *Stenia*. Significantly, *Stenia* was the feast immediately preceding the fast of *Thesmophoria*.

In their assault on the Akropolis, the old men stagger up the steep slope with logs of olivewood, torches and pitchers of live coals, intending to build a pyre and smoke the women out. Their plan backfires, literally, as the smoke gets in their eyes. They splutter and cough; the smoke attacks and bites them like a bitch. They declare: Λήμνιον τὸ πυρ - this fire is from Lemnos (l.299). The women's half of the chorus appears, at a run, with pitchers of water carried on their heads. Making light of their task, these old women rush to the defence of friends inside the citadel.

Undeniably this 'trouble'n strife' between the male fire and the female water has a ritual purpose. Even if singeing and dousing are among the earliest techniques of slapstick, the violence here is structured, and its mode determined by gender. Similar vestiges of a ritual contrast between women pouring wine-blood and a male (dressed as a woman) undergoing purificatory singeing are found in *Thesmophoriazusai* (l.728 ff.).

The dichotomy of the cold, watery female and the hot, fiery male is enshrined in Hippocratic medicine, traditional concepts which may be abstracted from ancient ritual practice, itself an expression, perhaps, of a dual lunar-phased logic, with a phase of blood and a phase of fire.

Women's water-carrying was an activity celebrated in ritual, in numerous cults, often of an initiatory kind. The most famous myth of women water-carriers is that of the Danaids, associated with another story that illumines the theme of the battle of water and fire — the myth of Hydra (water-serpent). I will outline both stories briefly, to show how they both clearly contrast a phase of water/blood with a phase of fire.

The Danaids

In the tale of the Danaids, fifty daughters of Danaos flee from a marriage with the fifty sons of Aigyptos by rowing across from North Africa to Argos. When they arrive, Argos is suffering drought. One of the ways in which the Danaids make the bright land of 'Argos abound in waters' is by murdering the dark sons of Aigyptos who have pursued them. With one exception, they cut off the heads of their

husbands and cast them into Lake Lerna which ever since then has risen, unfailingly, from so many heads. Under one of these never-failing springs, situated at the mouth of Tartarus, Hydra was born.

A late tradition in Greek literature insists that the Danaids were consigned to Tartarus, there to perform the endless task of carrying water in broken sieves. At least the notion of punishment is late. The core motif of women using sieves in ritual to water the land can be regarded as part of an original story, probably attached to rites of initiation and purification (see Harrison 1962: 619ff.). There is no reason to reject the placing of the Danaids in the Underworld — both the setting and the sieves connect them with bottomless channels or vessels of flowing water. The leaking sieves are readily interpretable as symbolic of the menstrual flow; during this phase — the waxing moon phase of blood (murder), wetness and rejection of marriage — the Danaids logically inhabit a world apart, either the Underworld or a place at its very entrance, the ritual grove of the Lernaean swamp (where, traditionally, it was the Danaids who introduced Thesmophoria to Greece).

Fire Festivals

One of the Danaids, Hypermnestra, spared her husband, Lynkeus, the gory fate of the others. In their story, we discover a vestige of a fire festival that was annually celebrated at Argos. Helping Lynkeus to escape from Argos to the nearby city of Lynkea/Lyrkeia, Hypermnestra instructed him, once there, to light a beacon as a signal of his safe arrival. She would respond with a beacon from the citadel of Argos. This can be read as a ritual that terminates the phase of blood, and signals the safe resumption of marriage relations. By Knight's argument, during the waning phase, from full moon on, cooking fires are relit, all traces of blood (from the flesh of women or animals) are removed by 'cooking' and the marriage feast is enjoyed.

The old men of the chorus in *Lysistrata* have referred to Lemnian fire. Most famous of all fire festivals of the Aegean was that of Lemnos, also mythically associated with killers of males, the Lemnian women who smelled so badly their husbands deserted them and were consequently murdered by them. The connotations of menstrual marriage-disruption seem basic to this story. According to Philostratos in *Heroicus*, the island of Lemnos 'is purified at a certain time of year, and the fire on the island is extinguished for nine days. A ship bearing festal envoys fetches fire from Delos.' During this period of purification the women 'on account of their unpleasant smell' joined in a ritual of segregation from their menfolk.

The Hydra, blood and fire

The ultra-venomous water-monster Hydra, with her fifty snaky heads, can surely be seen as an image — in patriarchal eyes — of the sisterhood of the Danaid cult at Lerna. Her story even more clearly alternates phases of blood and fire. Herakles slays this water-dragon but he is helpless against her all-entwining coils until he uses the blazing branches of the ritual grove itself to cauterise the necks of Hydra, staunching the flow of horribly poisonous blood.

The fire overcomes the blood, but the cycle is completed when Hydra, or the blood of Hydra, exacts a hideous revenge. Herakles used arrows dipped in Hydra's poison blood. One day he shoots the Kentaur Nessos who tries to abduct Herakles' wife Deianeira. Deianeira uses the magically powerful blood from Nessos' arrow-wound, containing Hydra's poison, to dye a splendid robe she has woven for Herakles. When he puts on the fatal robe, he writhes in death agony — made worse by jumping into water — until finally he lays himself on a pyre to be consumed by thunderbolts of Zeus. Again, fire purifies the poisonous blood of Hydra.

In *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes' rigid gender division of the chorus is entirely appropriate. In keeping with the cyclical logic of blood and fire, he has drawn on ritual tradition to counterpose women who battle for the sisterhood on sex-strike armed with well-water, against men who attempt to put a premature end to the sex-strike armed with fire. With the women at the height of their rebellious, wet, 'menstrual' phase of sex-strike, the men stand no chance. Ignominiously defeated, these would-be Herakleses drip miserably, their fire quite put out.

The Agōn: the Women turn the tables

The next male-female confrontation in *Lysistrata* takes the form of a debate — ἄγων in Greek — between the quasi-tyrannical official, the Proboulos, and a picket-line of sex-striking women. In the agōn of *Lysistrata* (ll.476-613), the women complete the role-reversal and seize 'male' gender-power. Symbolically, the token male, the Proboulos, is feminised (ll.529-38), given a veil and a wreath, told to shut up, chew on beans, and get on with working his wool (just like a woman). At the end, he is ritually expelled, dressed like a corpse, from the company of women.

The whole force of *Lysistrata*'s argument is that 'war is women's business'. Brilliantly, she turns inside out the traditional gender-role antithesis (as old as Homer in Greek literature) of female spinning versus male fighting. The women have shown their valour in the fray; they have displayed ἀρετή — (sc. manly) virtue. In her argument, *Lysistrata* reverts to women's characteristic skills and sphere of knowledge — weaving. She herself 'weaves' a complex and precise metaphor, to illustrate how the women will sort out the tangle of the city's problems. According to Xenophon (Mem.3.4.12) 'domestic management differs from the management of the city only in scope.' Of course there existed a strict division by gender of who managed what where. *Lysistrata* intrudes on that division with womanly wisdom. At the same time she makes a woman of the Proboulos, the city's political representative, teaching him to weave.

The women bring to life the two most prominent aspects of Athena herself. She is the warrior goddess who arms herself and will have no truck with male amorous attentions; she also governs weaving and the crafts. Weaving was of great importance in her state cult; at each Panathenaia festival, a new peplos was presented to her statue — a robe which had been woven by a group of young initiate girls. Further afield, in folklore and legend throughout Eurasia, spinning and weaving are used as symbol of cyclical time and hence of women's creative power in seclusion, especially at times of initiation/menstruation.

Transvestism in Dionysiac Drama

This subject is highly contentious. By its very nature of ambiguity, we cannot discover any easy answers. The wearing of clothes of the opposite sex, it seems, conjures a magical nexus of power, joining and disjoining at very specific liminal times in rite. I will draw the obvious parallels between the episodes of transvestism in our three Aristophanic comedies, and set beside them the outstanding example from tragedy, Pentheus in Euripides' *Bakkhai*. First, a little background on transvestism at Dionysiac festivals.

The original Attic kōmoi, rudimentary forerunners of the choruses in comedy, were bands of intoxicated revellers who performed songs and dances at the winter festival of Lenaia, smearing their faces with the lees of the new wine. Thus masked, the kōmos performed, lewd and riotous, indulging in phallic horseplay and cross-dressing. Philostratos, who wrote six centuries after Aristophanes, says that 'the kōmos permits women to act like men (ἀνδρίζεσθαι)' but does not tell us exactly how, in

contrast to the precise description that 'men put on women's clothes and walk like women' (Imagines, 1.2.298).

There is some evidence from Athenian vase-painting of women wearing phalloi. In *Ekklesiazusai* the women assuredly are shown to ἀνδρίζεσθαι: putting on false beards, their husbands' cloaks and hefty boots, and carrying the staff, they stomp along early in the morning to fill up all the seats at the Assembly and vote in a new gynaeocratic constitution.

More easily overlooked in *Ekklesiazusai* is the buffoon figure of Blepyros, husband of the heroine Praxagora. When we first encounter him, he is wearing his wife's little yellow krokōtos tunic and her persika — pretty Persian slippers. He is 'dying to have a crap' and invokes the goddess of childbirth to assist him.

Now let us look at the parallel situations of the males dressed as women in each of Aristophanes' three comedies. In *Lysistrata*, the Proboulos is the lone male on stage among a group of women who have organised a sex-strike and who have, at the point at which he becomes feminised, taken political control, albeit temporary. In *Thesmophoriazusai*, Mnesilochos is the lone male, in travesty, among women who are observing the sex-strike of Thesmophoria at which they 'insitute a city of women' (Detienne 1989: 139) while male political business is suspended. Blepyros is not seen so clearly isolated among the newly empowered women — *Ekklesiazusai*, the much later play, is far less formalistic than the other two. But Blepyros does play the part of the buffoon in the agōn of *Ekklesiazusai*, filling the same role as the Proboulos in *Lysistrata*, opposite his politically powerful wife Praxagora.

In Euripides' extraordinarily formal and archaic play *Bakkhai*, Pentheus, dressed as a woman worshipper of Dionysos, is the lone male among a group of women (who include his own mother and kinswomen). These women have abandoned their homes and the normal domestic order to go out on the mountains and celebrate the god's rites. As Pentheus earlier in the play threatened to hunt down the maenads (mad women), the maenads or bakkhai now hunt him, tracking him down like an animal to his perch at the top of a pine tree. Gathered at the foot of the tree like a hunting pack, they tear the tree itself out of the ground. Pentheus plunges down into their clutches 'with one incessant scream'.

He suffers the fate of the god — dismemberment — at the hands of his own mother. All authorities are agreed that he is the god-victim. But this does not reach down to what that god Dionysos is, the oldest identifiable 'Lord of the Women' of the Aegean region (see Burkert 1985: 31).

Any student of Lévi-Strauss' *Mythologiques* will hear in this story variations on the theme of the 'Bird-nester' which he identifies in one form or another virtually throughout native North and South America. In his thesis *Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*, which is formulated as a critique of Lévi-Strauss, Knight (1987) takes 'the theme of "skin-changing" or role-exchanging' to be

'the key to an understanding of *Mythologiques* as a whole. Repeated, periodic assumption of the Other's role — linked with earth/sky alternation and alternation between exogamy and incest — is a persistent theme in Lévi-Strauss' North American bird-nester myths.'

The bird-nester stories show the following characteristics: a) frequently, a motif of incest or excessively close relationship of male hero with mother or other kinswoman; b) a journey of the hero between worlds, i.e. climbing a tree/cliff (or visiting a land of the dead), where he is stranded; c) a change of clothing/skin; d) some form of incontinence suffered by the hero e.g. diarrhoea, bleeding, being eaten

and corresponding hunger and inability to eat, this associated with redness, rottenness and stench; e) recovery and return to the world, revenge on those who had caused the hero's difficulties, ending in a non-incestuous union with a woman. The famous Tricksters of North American myth furnish examples of cross-dressing with the opposite sex (rather than with an exogamous member of the same sex). Blepuros in *Ekklesiastusai* shows all the qualities of a classic Trickster.

The logic of these queasy, visceral stories is explained with elegant simplicity by Knight, who assumes a starting point for all these evidently 'lunar' myths in the menstrual synchrony of his model. The waxing and waning phases of the moon correspond, as I have outlined, to a gender of 'power' — when the ascendancy of culture in the form of gender-solidarity and kinship is asserted to separate the sexes — and a gender of 'surrender' — when the ritual power of blood is relinquished to allow marital intercourse between couples. As the moon waxes, when women mount their menstrual sex-strike, they assume the gender of 'power'. All men are now, actually or symbolically, attached to their sisters or mothers, not their wives, and share in their 'blood' power as sons and brothers. In a sense (i.e. from a patriarchal viewpoint), they are not now 'real' men. They are either sexually inactive or, if they are active, it will be in an insidious, 'incestuous', non-marital role.

For both sexes equally, the contact with blood precludes marital relations just as it precludes cooking or feasting. In Lévi-Strauss' myths, this becomes coded as the contact of the bird-nester (a hunter whose quarry is in the sky) with menstrual substitutes such as blood, shit, stench, death, rottenness etc. When full moon arrives and the moon wanes, the blood-cast spell breaks. Women and their brothers surrender their blood-symbolised power. They change partners, sisters abandoning brothers, brothers their sisters. People return to their spouses and the 'normal' world of marital sex, cooking, feasting and household chores. At full moon and dark moon, then, kin of both sexes exchange roles and also partners — a process conceptualised the world over as a change of clothing, gender or skin.

If Knight's original template becomes subjected to the distortions of a strongly patriarchal culture, the following effects can be expected. Under a patriarchy, the gender phases of 'power' and 'surrender' have become permanently encoded as 'masculine' power and 'feminine' surrender, appropriate to each sex exclusively. Nevertheless, a patriarchy such as that of Classical Athens could be thrown into reverse gear when it reverted to 'ritual' phase. Ritual power operated during women's festivals like Thesmophoria, quite anomalous within the patriarchy, when women reasserted the ancient blood taboos; or during the festivals of Dionysos, formally in comedy and tragedy. Under the sway of the archaic lunar logic, such ritual power, as presented in drama, transcended the contemporary norms of patriarchy, yet was exposed to patriarchy's distortions. Thus women who assumed power ritually became encoded as masculine, and might adopt male guise. Men among such women were correspondingly feminised, either seen as victims of the women (as Probulos/Pentheus) or as insidious tricksters, stealing a share of that power by masquerading as female (Mnesilochos, Blepuros).

We know of several rituals attached to ephebic initiation or liminal marriage practices in ancient Greek culture which show that, despite the fact of patriarchy, initiate males acquired ritual power through becoming 'feminised' in some way (usually expressed in dress, see Delcourt 1961). Knight has traced the roots of the Amerindian 'bird-nester' stories in the initiatory experiences of young males — ceremonies in which the youths undergo a type of male 'menarche', potentially and often actually central to a usurpation of female ritual power. I would argue that the Greek Pentheus myth, surely a myth of initiation, lies closer to the original model of female ritual power, since the male does not usurp that collective power, but serves to emphasise and focus it. With Pentheus, we have no recovery, but a violent, bloody descent to earth into the midst of his womenfolk, who tear him to pieces. Certainly,

he is male, dressed as female, among his kinswomen; as they have left their homes to celebrate their ritual power in the mountains — 'another world' — so he climbs the pine tree (in an attempt to partake of that power) towards the sky. The incontinence characteristic of the 'bird-nester' which he suffers is nothing less than bloody dismemberment. This recalls the actual Dionysiac ritual of σπαραγμός and ὠμοφάγια — tearing apart and eating of raw flesh.

In her illuminating study of the subject, Hermaphrodite, Marie Delcourt makes the acute observation that those Greek gods and heroes who legendarily disguised themselves as women — Dionysos, Herakles, Achilles and Theseus — are precisely those who have dealings with the Amazons, women who abjure sex, and bear and dress themselves as warriors. In their myths, they fluctuate from being σκότιοι, pre-initiate boys kept in the darkness of women's quarters, to being super-masculine, yet in combat with super-masculine women. Such myths could express the tensions in the switches of gender-power associated with different phases of the Moon, itself conceived by the Greeks as a bisexual being (Plato, Symposium, 190B; 9th Orphic Hymn). They could equally recall an insidious, patriarchal inversion, by which these heroes acquire ritual power through becoming, in some sense, female, in order the better to acquire power over females.

Numerous stories tell of Dionysos, dressed as a girl, in the company of women called his 'nurses', running away from pursuit by a male or males. To escape, Dionysos and his women may leap into a lake (e.g. Lerna) or the sea, into the 'menstrual' element of water rather than climbing up a tree into the air.

Herakles also undergoes periodic bouts of transvestism. He fluctuates throughout his myth-cycle between being the 'super-male' of the heroic labours, and a highly feminised figure, given to such effeminate luxuries as warm baths — suggestive of ritual ablutions at time of menstruation. Georges Dumézil (1979, 60-63) has shown the recurrence of marriage in the career of Herakles to be structural, alternating between misogyny and uxoriousness. This fits the lunar model very well; so do the details of Herakles' episodes of transvestism.

Most famous, or infamous, is the story of Omphale, the Lydian queen to whom Herakles is enslaved. They exchange clothes. She wears his lionskin and wields his club; he puts on the tos, and sits spinning — very like the Proboulos in fact. Little saffron krok have pointed to the significance of spinning and weaving as a symbol of 'menstrual' time. Attention should be drawn to Omphale's name, usually translated as navel; the matrilineal/incestuous connections are evident.

That splendid robe sent to Herakles by Deianeira is essentially a female garment, a peplos, the garment that makes a woman of him (Loraux, 1990: 39) until he exorcises the feminine by immolating himself on the pyre. This garment is dyed with the blood of the (evil-smelling) river-god Nessos, impregnated with the poison of (evil-smelling) Hydra.

Conclusion

I have shown how the logic of the major ritualistic episodes in Lysistrata can be clarified by applying a template of lunar periodicity and menstrual synchrony, considered as the generator of human ritual culture. As the community of women assumed power with their oath of sisterhood at the beginning, so the Athenian and Spartan men, former enemies, resume power through their oaths of peace and Panhellenic brotherhood at the end. Men's solidarity thus rests on the logically prior accomplishment of women's solidarity. All the episodes of women's 'sovereignty' or ritual power occur in the first half of

the play; men regain power in the second half. Even in its sequential structure, the play seems consistent with the ritual logic I have outlined.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Burkert, W

1983 *Homo Necans. The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth.*
Trans. P Bing. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press.

Burkert, W

1985 *Greek Religion.* Trans. J Raffan. Oxford: Blackwells.

Delcourt, M

1961 *Hermaphrodite. Myths and Rites of the Bisexual Figure in Classical Antiquity.*
Trans. J Nicholson. London: Studio Books.

Detienne, M

1989 The violence of well-born ladies: women in the thesmophoria. In M Detienne and J P Vernant (eds.) *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks.* Trans. P Wissing. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.

Dumézil, G

1979 *Mariages indo-européens.* Paris.

Harrison, J

1962 *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion.* London: Merlin Press.

Henderson, J

1987 *Aristophanes' Lysistrata.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Kerényi, K

1975 *Zeus and Hera. Archetypal Image of Father, Husband, and Wife.* Trans. C Holme.
London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Knight, C D

1983 Lévi-Strauss and the dragon: Mythologies reconsidered in the light of an Australian Aboriginal myth. *Man* 18: 21-50.

Knight, C D

1987 *Menstruation and the Origins of Culture. A Reconsideration of Lévi-Strauss's Work on Symbolism and Myth.* Unpublished Ph D thesis, University of London.

Lévi-Strauss, C

1981 *The naked man. Introduction to a Science of Mythology 4.* London: Cape.

Loraux, N

1990 Herakles: the super-male and the feminine. In: D M Halperin, J J Winkler, F I Zeitlin (eds.) *Before Sexuality*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

This paper was read at a meeting on 'Women and Sovereignty' convened by the Traditional Cosmology Society, St Andrews, Sept 1990