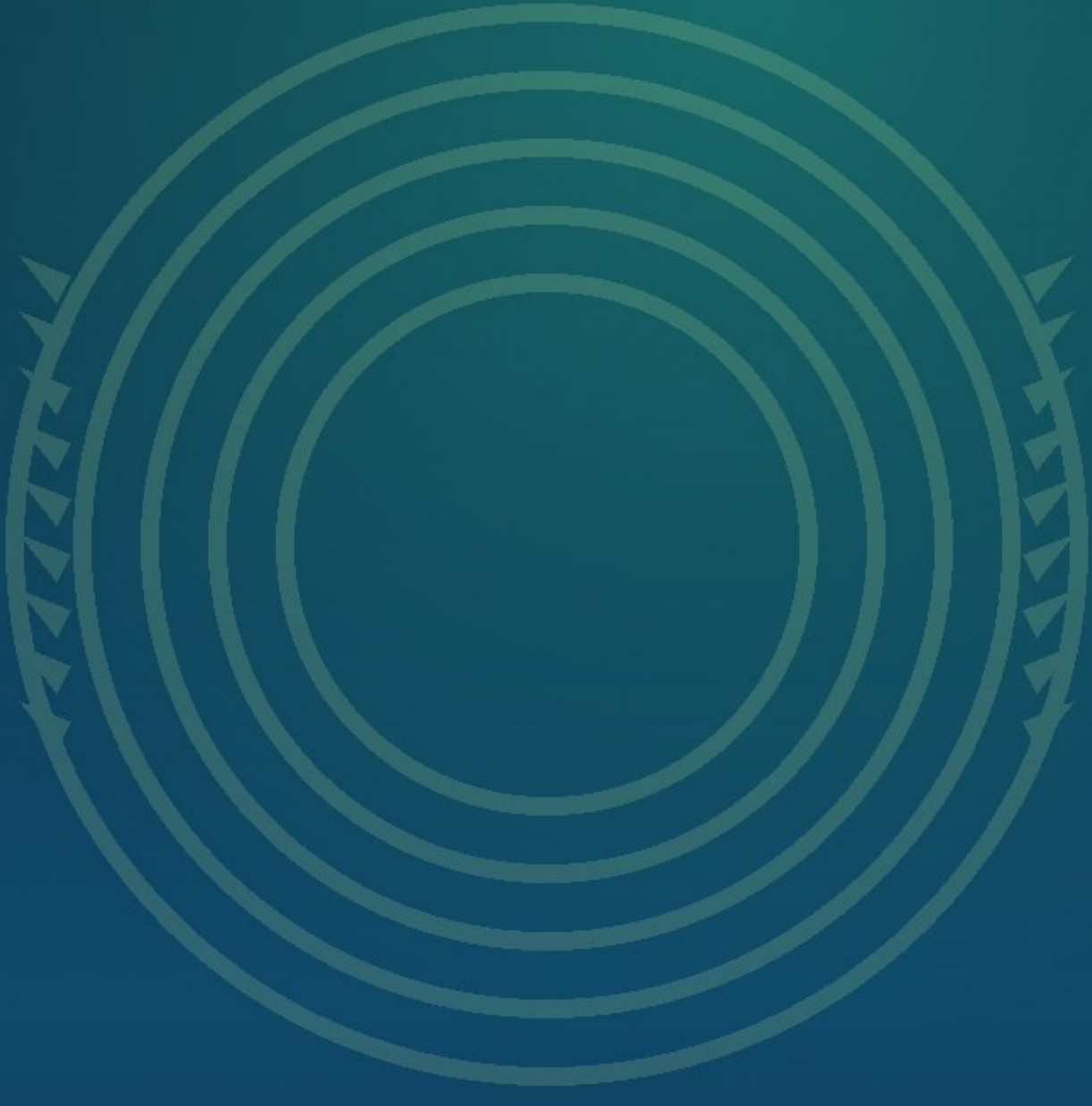
Lysistrata

Aristophanes



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LYSISTRATA

Translated from the Greek of

ARISTOPHANES

Illustrations by Norman Lindsay

FOREWORD

Lysistrata is the greatest work by Aristophanes. This blank and rash statement is made that it may be rejected. But first let it be understood that I do not mean it is a better written work than the _Birds_ or the _Frogs_, or that (to descend to the scale of values that will be naturally imputed to me) it has any more appeal to the collectors of "curious literature" than the _Ecclesiazusae_ or the _Thesmophoriazusae_. On the mere grounds of taste I can see an at least equally good case made out for the _Birds_. That brightly plumaged fantasy has an aerial wit and colour all its own. But there are certain works in which a man finds himself at an angle of vision where there is an especially felicitous union of the aesthetic and emotional elements which constitute the basic qualities of his uniqueness. We recognize these works as being welded into a strange unity, as having a homogeneous texture of ecstasy over them that surpasses any aesthetic surface of harmonic colour, though that harmony also is understood by the deeper welling of imagery from the core of creative exaltation. And I think that this occurs in

Lysistrata. The intellectual and spiritual tendrils of the poem are more truly interwoven, the operation of their centres more nearly unified; and so the work goes deeper into life. It is his greatest play because of this, because it holds an intimate perfume of femininity and gives the finest sense of the charm of a cluster of girls, the sweet sense of their chatter, and the contact of their bodies, that is to be found before Shakespeare, because that mocking gaiety we call Aristophanies reaches here its most positive acclamation of life, vitalizing sex with a deep delight, a rare happiness of the spirit.

Indeed it is precisely for these reasons that it is _not_ considered Aristophanes' greatest play.

To take a case which is sufficiently near to the point in question, to make clear what I mean: the supremacy of _Antony and Cleopatra_ in the Shakespearean aesthetic is yet jealously disputed, and it seems silly to the academic to put it up against a work like _Hamlet_. But it is the comparatively more obvious achievement of _Hamlet_, its surface intellectuality, which made it the favourite of actors and critics. It is much more difficult to realize the complex and delicately passionate edge of the former play's rhythm, its tides of hugely wandering emotion, the restless, proud, gay, and agonized reaction from life, of the blood, of the mind, of the heart, which is its unity, than to follow the relatively straightforward definition of Hamlet's nerves. Not that anything derogatory to _Hamlet_ or the _Birds_ is intended; but the value of such works is not enhanced by forcing them into contrast with other works which cover deeper and wider nexus of aesthetic and spiritual material. It is the very subtlety of the vitality of such works as _Antony and Cleopatra_ and _Lysistrata_ that makes it so easy to undervalue them, to see only a phallic play

and political pamphlet in one, only a chronicle play in a grandiose method in the other. For we have to be in a highly sensitized condition before we can get to that subtle point where life and the image mix, and so really perceive the work at all; whereas we can command the response to a lesser work which does not call so finely on the full breadth and depth of our spiritual resources.

I amuse myself at times with the fancy that Homer, Sappho, and Aristophanes are the inviolable Trinity of poetry, even to the extent of being reducible to One. For the fiery and lucid directness of Sappho, if her note of personal lyricism is abstracted, is seen to be an element of Homer, as is the profoundly balanced humour of Aristophanes, at once tenderly human and cruelly hard, as of a god to whom all sympathies and tolerances are known, but who is invulnerable somewhere, who sees from a point in space where the pressure of earth's fear and pain, and so its pity, is lifted. It is here that the Shakespearean and Homeric worlds impinge and merge, not to be separated by any academic classifications. They meet in this sensitivity equally involved and aloof, sympathetic and arrogant, suffering and joyous; and in this relation we see Aristophanes as the forerunner of Shakespeare, his only one. We see also that the whole present aesthetic of earth is based in Homer. We live and grow in the world of consciousness bequeathed to us by him; and if we grow beyond it through deeper Shakespearean ardours, it is because those beyond are rooted in the broad basis of the Homeric imagination. To shift that basis is to find the marshes of primitive night and fear alone beneath the feet: Christianity.

And here we return to the question of the immorality of _Lysistrata_. First we may inquire: is it possible for a man whose work has so

tremendous a significance in the spiritual development of mankind--and I do not think anyone nowadays doubts that a work of art is the sole stabilizing force that exists for life--is it possible for a man who stands so grandly at head of an immense stream of liberating effort to write an immoral work? Surely the only enduring moral virtue which can be claimed is for that which moves to more power, beauty and delight in the future? The plea that the question of changing customs arises is not valid, for customs ratified by Aristophanes, by Rabelais, by Shakespeare, have no right to change. If they have changed, let us try immediately to return from our disgraceful refinements to the nobler and more rarefied heights of lyric laughter, tragic intensity, and wit, for we cannot have the first two without the last. And anyhow, how can a social custom claim precedence over the undying material of the senses and the emotions of man, over the very generating forces of life?

How could the humanistic emotions, such as pity, justice, sympathy, exist save as pacifistic quietings of the desire to slay, to hurt, to torment. Where the desire to hurt is gone pity ceases to be a significant, a central emotion. It must of course continue to exist, but it is displaced in the spiritual hierarchy; and all that moves courageously, desirously, and vitally into the action of life takes on a deeper and subtler intention. Lust, then, which on the lower plane was something to be very frightened of, becomes a symbol of the highest spirituality. It is right for Paul to be terrified of sex and so to hate it, because he has so freshly escaped a bestial condition of life that it threatens to plunge him back if he listens to one whisper But it is also right for a Shakespeare to suck every drop of desire from life, for he is building into a higher condition, one self-willed, self-responsible,

the discipline of which comes from joy, not fear.

Sex, therefore, is an animal function, one admits, one insists; it may be only that. But also in the bewildering and humorous and tragic duality of all life's energies, it is the bridge to every eternity which is not merely a spectral condition of earth disembowelled of its lusts. For sex holds the substance of the image. But we must remember with Heine that Aristophanes is the God of this ironic earth, and that all argument is apparently vitiated from the start by the simple fact that Wagner and a rooster are given an analogous method of making love. And therefore it seems impeccable logic to say that all that is most unlike the rooster is the most spiritual part of love. All will agree on that, schisms only arise when one tries to decide what does go farthest from the bird's automatic mechanism. Certainly not a Dante-Beatrice affair which is only the negation of the rooster in terms of the swooning bombast of adolescence, the first onslaught of a force which the sufferer cannot control or inhabit with all the potentialities of his body and soul. But the rooster is troubled by no dreams of a divine orgy, no carnival-loves like Beethoven's _Fourth Symphony_, no heroic and shining lust gathering and swinging into a merry embrace like the third act of _Siegfried_. It is desire in this sense that goes farthest from the animal.

Consciously, no one can achieve the act of love on earth as a completed thing of grace, with whatever delirium of delight, with whatever ingenious preciosity, we go through its process. Only as an image of beauty mated in some strange hermaphroditic ecstasy is that possible. I mean only as a dream projected into a hypothetical, a real heaven. But on earth we cannot complete the cycle in consciousness that would give us the freedom of an image in which two identities

mysteriously realize their separate unities by the absorption of a third thing, the constructive rhythm of a work of art. It is thus that Tristan and Isolde become wholly distinct individuals, yet wholly submerged in the unity that is Wagner; and so reconcile life's duality by balancing its opposing laughters in a definite form--thereby sending out into life a profounder duality than existed before. A Platonic equipoise, Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence--the only real philosophic problem, therefore one of which these two philosophers alone are aware.

But though Wagner with Mathilde Wesendonck in his arms was Tristan in the arms of Isolde, he did not find a melody instead of a kiss on his lips; he did not find a progression of harmonies melting through the contours of a warm beauty with a blur of desperate ecstasies, semitones of desire, he found only the anxious happiness of any other lover. Nevertheless, he was gathering the substance of the second act of _Tristan und Isolde_. And it is this that Plato means when he says that fornication is something immortal in mortality. He does not mean that the act itself is a godlike thing, a claim which any bedroom mirror would quickly deride. He means that it is a symbol, an essential condition, and a part of something that goes deeper into life than any geometry of earth's absurd, passionate, futile, and very necessary antics would suggest.

It is a universal fallacy that because works like the comedies of Aristophanes discuss certain social or ethical problems, they are inspired by them. Aristophanes wrote to express his vision on life, his delight in life itself seen behind the warping screen of contemporary event; and for his purposes anything from Euripides to Cleon served as ground work. Not that he would think in those terms, naturally: but

the rationalizing process that goes on in consciousness during the creation of a work of art, for all its appearance of directing matters, is the merest weathercock in the wind of the subconscious intention. As an example of how utterly it is possible to misunderstand the springs of inspiration in a poem, we may take the following remark of B. B. Rogers: _It is much to be regretted that the phallus element should be so conspicuous in this play.... (This) coarseness, so repulsive to ourselves, was introduced, it is impossible to doubt, for the express purpose of counter-balancing the extreme earnestness and gravity of the play_. It seems so logical, so irrefutable; and so completely misinterprets every creative force of Aristophanes' Psyche that it certainly deserves a little admiration. It is in the best academic tradition, and everyone respects a man for writing so mendaciously. The effort of these castrators is always to show that the parts considered offensive are not the natural expression of the poet, that they are dictated externally. They argue that Shakespeare's coarseness is the result of the age and not personal predilection, completely ignoring the work of men like Sir Philip Sidney and Spenser, indeed practically all the pre-Shakespearean writers, in whom none of this so-called grossness exists. Shakespeare wrote sculduddery because he liked it, and for no other reason; his sensuality is the measure of his vitality. These liars pretend similarly that because Rabelais had a humanistic reason for much of his work--the destructior Mediaevalism, and the Church, which purpose they construe of course as an effort to purify, etc.--therefore he only put the lewdery to make the rest palatable, when it should be obvious even to an academic how he glories in his wild humour.

What the academic cannot understand is that in such works, while

attacking certain conditions, the creative power of the vigorous spirits is so great that it overflows and saturates the intellectual conception with their own passionate sense of life. It is for this reason that these works have an eternal significance. If Rabelais were merely a social reformer, then the value of his work would not have outlived his generation. If _Lysistrata_ were but a wise political tract, it would have merely an historical interest, and it would have ceased spiritually at 404 B.C.

But Panurge is as fantastic and fascinating a character now as he was 300 years ago, Lysistrata and her girls as freshly bodied as any girl kissed to-day. Therefore the serious part of the play is that which deals with them, the frivolous part that in which Rogers detects gravity and earnestness.

Aristophanes is the lord of all who take life as a gay adventure, who defy all efforts to turn life into a social, economic, or moral abstraction. Is it therefore just that the critics who, by some dark instinct, unerringly pick out the exact opposite of any creator's real virtues as his chief characteristics, should praise him as an idealistic reformer? An "ideal" state of society was the last thing Aristophanes desired. He wished, certainly, to eliminate inhumanities and baseness; but only that there might be free play for laughter, for individual happiness.

Consequently the critics lay the emphasis on the effort to cleanse society, not the method of laughter. Aristophanes wished to destroy Cleon because that demagogue failed to realize the poet's conception of dignified government and tended to upset the stability of Hellas. But it was the stability of life, the vindication of all individual

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