

DIDASKALIA 

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*Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.*

# DIDASKALIA

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**Note**

*Didaskalia* is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 9 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at [didaskalia.net](http://didaskalia.net), which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

# Risk-taking and Transgression: Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* Today

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**Robert Phiddian**

*Flinders University*

*Lysistrata*, first performed in 411 BCE, is an Old Comedy about a fictional sex strike by the women of Greece designed to stop the Peloponnesian War. At a dark moment, when defeat appeared to be looming for Athens, the play provided a fantasy of peace. In recent decades it has been the most often revived and taught of Aristophanes' plays, with 119 performances worldwide in the years 1990–2010, according to the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama.<sup>1</sup> This piece, a collaboration between a translator and theatre researcher (Michael Ewans) and a Greekless literary scholar (Robert Phiddian), recounts a small part of that performance history, a part that sheds light on how this play translates (both literally and culturally) from fifth-century Athens to twenty-first-century Australia. The performances examined are a full-scale production designed to test and perfect Ewans's new translation of the play at the University of Newcastle (New South Wales) in 2005, and a series of dramatised readings of the play (in the context of a course on comedy and satire) performed at Flinders University in Adelaide between 1998 and 2009, initially with Alan Sommerstein's translations published by Penguin and subsequently with Ewans's translation.

*Lysistrata* remains popular not just because it is good, but also because it remains topically significant for its antiwar message and the apparently feminist premise of women taking over public affairs.<sup>2</sup> These causes of popularity are potentially a two-edged sword for understanding the play, as relevance can be bought at the price of anachronism and distortion of meaning. Our experience of differing translations in performances and dramatised readings suggests that an antiwar interpretation of the play's 'message' is very sustainable in both text and performance, while a feminist reading is less so. We also found confirmation of James Robson's comment in a recent overview of Aristophanes' work: 'It is often said that new translations of works are needed every generation, but in the case of Aristophanes the immediacy of some versions and adaptations (above all those written for the stage) can evaporate within a far shorter time than that' (Robson 2009, 217). The challenge for a prospective new translator lies in attuning his or her new version closely to the time of performance and publication, without including elements which will date the translation too rapidly.<sup>3</sup> Our observations will focus particularly on one scene, the raucous peace negotiation which *Lysistrata* orchestrates between the Athenian and Spartan ambassadors over the beautiful and naked body of Reconciliation. While the Sommerstein and Ewans translations have much in common, this piece will focus on their differences.

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## Michael Ewans's experience

Stephen Halliwell comments on English translations of Aristophanes that: 'Translators have found it [easy] to excise obscenity, and even give specious reasons for doing so. . . . There are few who shirk at nothing in this area.'<sup>4</sup> One of the main aims of my new translations of Aristophanes has been to rise to this challenge.

My translation was first performed in 2005, in a modern-dress performance which took place in a replica of the *orchestra* backed by a set representing a classical Greek temple, but with explicit sex scenes decorating the pediment, and with modern anti-war slogans (e.g. 'NO MORE BUSH WARS') sprayed as graffiti on the façade. Anne-Marie Adams as *Lysistrata*, wearing a smart business suit but with sexy red



but are inscribed upon Reconciliation's sexual organs.

**1st SPARTAN**

We're willing, if we can have  
this nice round bit.

**LYSISTRATA**

Which one?

**1st SPARTAN**

Pylos, the secret entrance.  
We've always wanted it, and now I'm going to grope it.

**1st ATHENIAN**

No way, they can't have that.

**LYSISTRATA**

Let them have it.

**1st ATHENIAN**

Where can we attack them from?

**LYSISTRATA**

Ask for another place instead.

**1st ATHENIAN**

This is terrible; give us instead of that  
the Hedgehog, and the Malian Gulf  
just behind it, and the Legs of Megara.

1170

**1st SPARTAN**

No way, not all of those, good sir.

**LYSISTRATA**

Back off; don't argue about a pair of legs.

**1st ATHENIAN**

I want to get my clothes off and farm my patch.

**1st SPARTAN**

I want to get in first with the manure.

*(Exit RECONCILIATION, discomfited and in haste, into the skēnē).<sup>7</sup>*

The Spartans bid for 'this nice round bit'—Reconciliation's bum—and propose to grope her 'secret entrance'—Pylos, a real concealed harbour entrance in Spartan-dominated territory on which the Athenians had managed to establish a bridgehead. Here Aristophanes lampoons an (alleged) Spartan preference for anal intercourse. Then the Athenians counter-bid for 'the hedgehog'—a real place, Echinus, whose name literally means 'sea-urchin' (i.e. Reconciliation's pubic hair); then for the Malian Gulf, a seaway which in real life was adjacent to Echinus (i.e. Reconciliation's vagina); and finally for 'the legs of

Megara', the name given to the fortified walls connecting the city of Megara to its port. (These walls had actually been demolished some years before the performance of *Lysistrata* in 411, but that fact did not disturb Aristophanes in hot pursuit of a sexual pun.) The negotiations conclude with the 1st Athenian Ambassador proposing to strip and 'farm [his] patch'—i.e. assault Reconciliation from the front—while his Spartan counterpart wants 'to get in first with the manure', i.e. assault her from the rear. At this point, in my stage direction (based on the decision we took in rehearsals), Reconciliation responds by exiting 'discomfited and in haste'. Brooke Medcalf played Reconciliation as becoming obviously more uncomfortable with the situation as the objectification of (and lust for) her body increased. But after Reconciliation's exit *Lysistrata* instantly reasserted her authority (1175ff.)

The reception of this scene by actresses and audiences in the Newcastle performances was markedly different from that in Robert's moved reading in Adelaide. None of my actresses, not even the player of Reconciliation, felt any discomfort with performing this scene (indeed, they thoroughly enjoyed the whole play). And on the DVD you can hear audience laughter, from both males and females, throughout this scene.

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### Robert Phiddian's experience

My personal knowledge of *Lysistrata* began in 1980 with the Sommerstein translation of 1973,<sup>8</sup> in an almost-perfect context for that version. We went through it in class over a couple of weeks; we were 16–17-year-old boys of privileged background, self-selected as cultural nerds and smartarses by our decision to choose the minority year-12 subject, Classical Civilisation; and our culturally-programmed tendency to over-confidence was amplified by hormones. We found smut in the text that even Sommerstein hadn't put there, and the fact that the Spartans spoke in stage-Scottish accents seemed perfectly natural and hilarious to us, even though we had lived our lives in Melbourne, a long way from Athens, but only geographically distant from the schools and colleges of the British mid-century classicist tradition that marked the translation we were enjoying. In our outpost of empire and privilege, we were an ideal audience for the translation.

A couple of decades later, in 1998, when I came to devise a course on Comedy and Satire at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia, with my colleague Murray Bramwell, I went back to *Lysistrata*. In a course joint-taught between the Drama and English departments, we set it as the example of Old Comedy. We discovered that Sommerstein's was still the available translation in the affordable Penguin series, and we arranged with a director, Eddy Knight, to put on a reading with a volunteer student cast and one rehearsal. This worked well, and we repeated the exercise each year we ran the course, with the same director and different students, swapping the 1973 edition for the revised but not transformed version of Sommerstein that became available in 2002. It was clear from the start that, while this translation worked adequately, it was less than ideal for the context. Our students (including the volunteer actors) had to bridge some cultural distance to enjoy the performance. Clearly a lot of that distance came from the cultural gap between fifth-century Athens and twenty-first-century Adelaide; some of it also, we suspected, could be ascribed to the translation.<sup>9</sup>

The opportunity to try something different came in 2009, when I met Michael Ewans at a conference and was granted permission to use his soon-to-be-published translation, which had been developed through performance and adaptation at Newcastle University in New South Wales in 2005.<sup>10</sup> In the Australian context, Flinders and Newcastle are broadly similar universities whose students tend not to have had much previous contact with Greek and Roman culture. Both universities opened in the mid-1960s in substantial Australian cities, and both have long-established practical programmes in drama as well as traditional offerings in the humanities; their demographics are broadly similar. Consequently, the movement from one translation to another provides a reasonably controlled experiment. The direction

and the level of preparation of the Flinders readings have been constant and the pool of student actors has been similar on all occasions; there have been no great variations in the size and nature of the student body.

While the movement from the earlier to the updated version of Sommerstein had yielded only marginal improvements in intelligibility for a new-millennium audience, there were some significant differences between earlier performances and the production of 2009. The first I noticed was that the current crop of actors found the Ewans translation easier to perform as a minimally rehearsed reading. This was partly a function of the script layout, as they were not working from a photocopy this time, and the font size was larger. Nevertheless, the language of the Ewans translation was clearly more approachable for these students than Sommerstein's, an advantage most obvious in the bawdy passages, which were often indirect to the point of incomprehensibility in Sommerstein, and anything but that in Ewans. The Ewans version is much more sexually explicit than Sommerstein's, a difference that reflects change in cultural expectations between 1973 and 2005. For the Australian youth of the new millennium, explicit language can still be shocking (when it is very blunt or especially well set up), but it just doesn't generate the furtive hilarity in verbal deflection that obtained a couple of decades ago. Aristophanes' wonderfully bizarre image (then as now) of 'the lion on the cheese-grater position' raised a laugh in both versions, but Lampito's mention of 'When Menelaos saw the breasts of naked Helen' (Ewans) works far more directly than 'he got but a wee glimpse of Helen's twa wee apples' (Sommerstein 2002, 146). Even though the apple metaphor is literally 'there' in the Greek, it is an off-key distraction in current Australia, where breasts are not apples and are seldom discussed in a stage-Scottish accent. Indeed, the loss of the accents to mark Spartans and others removed an impediment to comic appreciation generally. This may well play differently in Britain or the US, with their marked regional accents. Australians, however, inhabit a large continent with few regional differences in English, and the use of accents to differentiate speakers of different Greek dialects was received among my students as an artificial convention of another time and place.

The most striking change was that the gender dynamics of the play were different in the new translation, in two, not entirely consistent ways. The part of Lysistrata herself had always been a problem in the past. Even though we had routinely placed very capable actresses from the Honours Drama Centre programme in the part, they had never managed to shake off a kind of mother-superior seriousness. In the new translation, Lysistrata was a much more human and engaged character, even distinctly funny in places. For example, while the Sommerstein treatment of 'those six-inch leather jobs which used to help us out' is at least mildly euphemistic and can be played to convey disdain, there is no escaping her human appetite in Ewans's rendition: 'Worse still; since the Milesians deserted us, /I haven't even seen a compact dildo, /not one little leather friend' (108–10). In the Sommerstein version, the sense that Lysistrata herself was making a sacrifice in engaging in the sex strike did not come through, and it was too easy to assimilate her character with the stereotype of female chaste restraint that has meant 'good woman' in Christian European culture for centuries. A Lysistrata with an appetite both for sex and for humour was a refreshing angle on the play for me. It brought out something that intervening cultural experience had obscured.

Less appealing to my ideological bent was the way the play became more phallic and patriarchal in the Ewans translation. This tendency is also almost certainly true to the original Athenian context. Nevertheless, it was clear that the female actors were disempowered by the sheer bluntness of the male invective towards them, even while the action of the play suggested that they were winning the battles.

The power of the word 'bitch' (433) and the string of invective that came after it was amplified for actors and audience by the comic phalluses the males wore. These were anachronistically shocking and amusing in our productions—for Aristophanes' audience they would have been far more normal. Still, it was only

in the Ewans production that the football-sock phalluses became objects of powerful mirth, I think because of the unfettered violence of the misogynistic language—even if it was matched by women’s intense abuse of males at several points in the play, in particular in their response to the Bureaucrat at 433ff. In Sommerstein’s politer, more-euphemistic version, the male violence was somewhat deflected by the indirection of the language, and the sexual politics became, in practice, more amenable to an egalitarian feminist reading.

This difference between the two translations also corresponds with one actress’s experience as *Reconciliation*, which makes a contrast with the experience outlined above for the Newcastle production. This part is formally mute and notionally naked in the original text. Lysistrata gets the Athenian and Spartan ambassadors to negotiate a settlement of territory, with the parts of *Reconciliation*’s beautiful naked body representing parts of Greece such as (the mildest example) ‘the legs of Megara’ (Ewans). For obvious ethical reasons in a fairly informal university-course-based situation, the part was played fully and fairly plainly clothed in our moved reading, and yet the actress became visibly uncomfortable at the ambassadors’ vigorous verbal objectification of her body (she has reported since that this was how she felt, not just how she acted the part). In the past, through Sommerstein, Lysistrata had been very much the orchestrator of this scene, using the ridiculous priapism of the Ambassadors to discipline them and lead them to peace. In the new translation, she lost control of the scene as the horny and borderline-violent obsessions of the male actors took over. In lines 1162–75, discussed above, Lysistrata’s brief instructions (‘Let them have it’, ‘Ask for another place instead’, ‘Back off; don’t argue about a pair of legs’) came out quite differently in the performances of the two translations. In the Sommerstein performances, Lysistrata was magisterially in charge of the pitifully priapic ambassadors, but when the Ewans text was used these lines became an increasingly desperate attempt to keep the situation from getting out of control. The laughter of the audience underscored Lysistrata’s difficulty in containing the Ambassadors and heightened the male sexual aggression of ‘I want to get in first and farm my patch’ in Ewans, whereas in the Sommerstein Lysistrata was displaying and withholding female sex, clearly controlling the males. This difference is in large part a choice of production, but the words in the Ewans translation unleashed the bawdy power of male sexual aggression, and the females became relatively more abject as a consequence.

Here as elsewhere, the performance in the Ewans translation was more alienating to the women in it and in the audience than the previous performances of Sommerstein. It was notable that, in the question-and-answer session we routinely hold after the performance, it was the four male actors rather than the twelve females who did 90% of the talking. This may just be happenstance, but it correlates with the plausible silencing effect of a bluntly phallic and often obscene translation. Over the decades, I have been in the habit of assimilating the play to a sort of raucous Germaine Greer-like liberal feminism, and the previous productions of the Sommerstein version permitted (though they did not require) that reading. By contrast, this performance wouldn’t let me hold to that interpretation. This play was very clearly a fantasy of peace, not of female power. Obviously, given the Athenian context of a highly androcentric culture, this is likely to be the original intent. Consequently, the Ewans translation tells twenty-first-century readers and critics something real about the play that many of us don’t especially want to hear.

This seems to me the most significant point of difference between the performances of the different translations, and it is worth stressing that they had much in common. To a reader lacking Greek, each translation gives a satisfactory version of this classic play. In our Flinders moved readings, one of the constants has been the audience discomfort during the long opening scene when Lysistrata tries to persuade the women of Greece to give up sex to achieve peace. This was pretty much the same in both translations, as the audience felt unease at young women talking dirty. It’s not that the students watching hadn’t heard it all before, but they didn’t expect it in a lecture theatre or in a classic text. For the first few minutes, there has always been a palpable resistance to finding rude language funny, until the laughter-

authorizing phalluses of the male actors appear in the first chorus. This was and remains pedagogical gold, as it allows one to make the crucial point that the pre-Christian Greeks just didn't share our still-strong stereotype of asexual female identity and discourse. In the play-space afforded by comedy, students can recognize that attitudes to sex do not merely get stuffier as one goes back in history, as one tends to assume, but rather that they vary in intriguing ways. They can see that the ancient Greeks certainly held different attitudes from ours and were in some ways more liberated, even while being more clearly patriarchal. This is learning about the range of what it is to be human across time and culture.

Even in the fairly simple and occasionally stilted staged readings we have performed over the years, much of the play is enduringly hilarious. The phalluses and other objectifications of gender such as the third woman's attempt to escape the enforced chastity of the Acropolis by using a helmet to simulate pregnancy (742ff.) never tire. The scene where Myrrhine teases her priapic husband Kinesias mercilessly with pillows, blankets, ointment, and an eventual desertion before consummation (870–951) is also a hit. The play works in modern Australia, millennia after its first production, because of the powerful way it stages the conflict between the death-wish of war and the life-wish of sex. It is hard to conceive of a world to which this wonderful attack by fertility on militarism will have nothing funny and useful to say.

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## Twofold Conclusions

We have not tried to force ourselves into a single voice thus far, so we will each reach our own conclusion.

**Robert:** The main lesson of the experiment for me, as a literary interpreter, is about the nature and limits of cross-cultural translation for the message of satirical drama. *Lysistrata* can, with tolerable anachronism, be read currently as an anti-war play, and even as one specifically against a particular war, like the one in Iraq. *Mutatis mutandis*, it can even be claimed for the pacifist tradition, though it's pretty clear that Aristophanes was no systematic pacifist. On the other hand, assimilating the text, as I used to do, with any version of post-enlightenment feminism is a step too far. While it is fine to see it as a reprise of the war between the sexes (an ancient topos), anything more ideologically detailed makes something of the play that it hasn't the resources to support. The lack of euphemism in the Ewans translation, and the masculine sexual aggression it unleashes, makes this point unavoidable. It is worth noting that this classroom experience echoes the consistent view of classical scholars that the play is about hostility to war, not about oppression of women.<sup>11</sup>

**Michael:** My principal observation from our two experiments is the perhaps-not-very-startling one that the modern reception of my accurate (and therefore-confrontational) translation of Aristophanes' transgressive humour depends heavily on the context in which it is performed and received. The principal reason for the difference between the experiences at Flinders and Newcastle is that mine was not a reading in a classroom or para-classroom activity, but a full production with music, lights and costume. Actor and audience involvement is, I believe, necessarily greater in a full production than in a moved reading or workshop that is part of a course; both actors and audience are participating wholly voluntarily, and they are there primarily to entertain and be entertained, not to learn something (though of course any presentation of *Lysistrata* in Australia today will be a learning experience for both audience and actors, given the extent of modern ignorance of the nature of Greek drama). In a full production there is simply more momentum impelling the audience, as a group sitting together in the half-light to share the full experience of live performance, towards the climax than in a moved reading; after the audience has been conditioned to blunt sexual language and gesture from the first scene onwards, Aristophanes' challenging catharsis becomes for them the crowning glory of the play's already rampant 'obscenity' (a concept for which, by the way, the Greeks had no word; both the concept and the word are a Roman

invention).

There is for me, as a drama professor who is heavily involved in performance as a basis for research, an enormous difference between the energies created in a live show for which the punters pay money and those generated in a classroom experiment, part of a course and subject to subsequent formal analysis in tutorials. Robert has reported his audience's unease during Scene 1, where first Lysistrata and Kalonike begin with puns and double entendres, and then—when all the women from Athens, Boiotia, Sparta and Megara begin to gather—increasingly ribald expressions of their sexuality, and what they want to do with it (screw men), start to litter the script. During performances of the Newcastle full production there were certainly a few initial gasps as the full sexual range of the script (and therefore of Aristophanes' original) in the mouths of young women made their first impact on the audience; but the audience members (both male and female, young and old) had very soon fully adapted to it and become comfortable with, for example:

**LYSISTRATA**

And where is this young woman from?

**LAMPITO**

She came with me, and has authority to speak  
for the Boiotian women.

**MYRRHINE**

Ah, Boiotia, land  
of beautiful and fertile plains.

**KALONIKE** (*lifting up the Boiotian girl's see-through miniskirt*)

—please note,  
the grass has just been elegantly trimmed (85–9).

There was no question of waiting (as there was in Robert's workshop) for the appearance of the phallus-wearing old men to start the sexual laughter of the play. And I witnessed a very similar audience reaction when I directed a version which was partly in modern Greek and partly in English (for expatriates and tourists) in the ancient Odeion at Paphos, Cyprus, in July 2007. There too the videorecording provides clear evidence that after a short initial shock the audience accepted and enjoyed the fact that the young women 'talked dirty'—and there the actress playing Lysistrata was anything but a mother-superior figure; sexy, busty and redheaded and using her assets to great expressive effect right from the beginning of the play.

In my (admittedly biased) point of view the productions and workshops discussed in this paper unambiguously point to the need for new translations in which Aristophanes' 'transgressive humour'—frank obscenity, obscene pun and *double entendre*—can shine in all its glory in performance for the second decade of the twenty-first century.

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**notes**

<sup>1</sup> On the performance history of *Lysistrata* cf. Robson 2009, 196 ff.

<sup>2</sup> On gender issues in Aristophanes cf., e.g. Henderson 1996, 20–29 and Van Steen 2002.

<sup>3</sup> There is also the issue of versions which are adaptations rather than translations, such as the fine modernizations by Mary-Kay Gamel of *Thesmophoriazousai* (*The Julie Thesmo Show*) and *Wasps* (*The*

*Buzz*). These were highly effective in production, but in both cases only the framework and a number of the jokes were Aristophanic; *The Julie Thesmo Show* took place on the set of a contemporary television talk show, so there was quite wide resonance; by contrast *The Buzz* grafted on campus politics of Gamel's home university (UC Santa Cruz), which made it a show only for that time and place.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Halliwell, 'Aristophanes,' in O. Classe, ed. 2000, 77–78. It is true that Sommerstein is quite explicit in his Aris and Philips series of scholarly editions (where the translation is provided facing the Greek), but not in his Penguin translation discussed here. Great credit must also be given to Henderson, who may be said to have inaugurated the serious study of Aristophanic obscenity in *The Maculate Muse* (1975). His translation of *Lysistrata*, *Thesmophoriazousai* and *Eccleziiazousai* is also fairly explicit (1996). But it is a literary version, in prose and designed for students of ancient Greek culture rather than for performers and audiences.

<sup>5</sup> But Revermann (2006, 158 n. 59) has revived the contrary view that nude slave girls played the silent female extras in Old Comedy.

<sup>6</sup> 'Cunt' rather than 'pussy' for *kusthos*, because the Athenian, dominated by his unbearable erection (1120–1, 1136) would not be euphemistic if he was speaking a language (like modern English) which presents strong and milder alternatives. The medical term vagina is out of the question in this context.

<sup>7</sup> Aristophanes (trans. Ewans) 2010, 97–99.

<sup>8</sup> *Aristophanes*, trans. A. Sommerstein 1973 (revised edition 2002).

<sup>9</sup> On translation of Aristophanes cf. Walton 2006, 195ff.; Robson 2009, 188ff.; and Ewans 2010, 41ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Aristophanes* (trans. M. Ewans), 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., e.g. Henderson, 1996, 17–18 and Cartledge 1990, 32–42.

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