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A Warlike Aphrodite: Reconciling Aphrodite's Status as
Both the Goddess of Sexuality and War

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University of Texas Austin

Descending God, Ascending Man: A Study of the
Mycenean Gold Masks from Grave Circle A

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or a Political Critique?

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Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

After over a year and a half of unprecedented challenges, it seems like we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. As the world slowly edges forwards in the fight against COVID-19, the academic sphere has also striven towards a greater sense of normalcy: students are returning to campuses; classes are resuming in-person instruction; and we are finally able to get some time away from the screen.

Meanwhile, as the world takes a small step, undergraduate classical scholarship has taken a giant leap forward. This year, *Aisthesis* received a record number of submissions, each contributing fascinating readings and interpretations of antiquity. Therefore, as the new school year starts, we are proud to present the tenth volume of our journal, featuring three exceptional papers from our undergraduate peers. Once again, our edition has aimed to highlight the interdisciplinary nature of Classics. Whether you are fascinated by the underplayed representations of Aphrodite, the archaeology of funerary masks, or the political and social roles of women in Aristophanic plays, there is something in this journal for everyone to enjoy.

I would like to thank the Stanford Department of Classics for their constant support over the years. I would also like to commend everybody who submitted a paper for consideration and our hard-working student editors, without whom the publication of this journal would not have been possible.

Unfortunately, as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. For the past three years, I have watched this journal grow, read numerous fascinating papers, and met incredible Classicists from Stanford as a result. *Aisthesis* has always striven to promote Classics among undergraduates, whether it be through publishing papers of our peers worldwide or providing our editors with the opportunity to glimpse the intricacies underlying academic journals. Therefore, it is in complete confidence that I now hand the reins over to my successor, Katherine Finley '22. Under her expert leadership, I am certain that *Aisthesis* will soar to new heights.

To the journal members by my side throughout my time as Editor-in-Chief, thank you for your support, devotion, and friendship. I cannot wait to see how the journal continues to flourish this next year with Volume X.

Will Shao
Aisthesis Editor-in-Chief





CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Aisthesis is now accepting submissions for Volume X. We publish academic papers related to the ancient Mediterranean as well as new translations of Greek and Latin texts. Our submission deadline for the spring 2022 volume is 11:59 PM EST on December 31, 2021. Each author can submit up to two submissions of a maximum of 10,000 words (roughly 30 double-spaced pages) each. Further journal information and submission guidelines may be found at the following link: <https://classics.stanford.edu/projects/aisthesis-undergraduate-journal>




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A Warlike Aphrodite: Reconciling Aphrodite's Status as Both the Goddess of Sexuality and War

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ABSTRACT

Homer's Aphrodite is famously the "Goddess of Love." Under the predominant depiction of Aphrodite in Hellenic culture, she exists to bring mortals love and pleasure, and she neither belongs on the battlefield nor is she threatening.¹ Homer's depiction of Aphrodite, however, makes a conscious effort to depict Aphrodite as subservient under the rule of Zeus. The incapable Aphrodite of Homer descends from Inanna and Astarte, two goddesses of both sexuality and war in the ancient Near East. This study shall go into the nature of the two war goddesses to trace the lost and reframed features in Aphrodite's worship. We shall follow the clear associations with war in the worship of Inanna and Astarte, the gender-bending cult of Inanna that continued in Aphrodite, and how both goddesses had complex cults just like Aphrodite had. Moving on to the violent Hesiodic genealogy of Aphrodite, we shall merit the reasoning behind the loss of her warlike qualities and the conscious efforts by Homer and later authors to Hellenize her. We shall also see how she uses her sphere of sexuality to retain power in a way that recalls her Eastern days, resisting total taming that was considered appropriate for the goddess. Finally, we shall then delve into how the worship of Venus evolved and later affected the worship of Aphrodite in the Greek colonies, bringing back her political associations and her warlike qualities to a small extent. Too often is Aphrodite reduced to being the "goddess of love." Tracing how the worship of Aphrodite revolved around warfare and sexuality allows us to see the goddess for who she is outside of Homer and her Hellenized form: the formidable and powerful crosser of barriers.

¹ Aeschylus employs the name Aphrodite to mean beauty, charm and grace in *Agamemnon* 419. Love and sexuality, as we will see later, are also outright stated to be her sole sphere in the *Iliad* (5.426) and *The Theogony* (173).

THE HOMERIC INTERPRETATION OF APHRODITE

The language of Homer itself associates Aphrodite explicitly with love, establishing love, and emphatically not warfare, as her sphere of influence. Ἀφροδίτια denotes the act of love.² Aphrodite herself is, of course, supremely desirable; in the *Odyssey*, her name is used as a metonymy for sexual intercourse.³ The archaic noun for ἔρωϝ, sexual love, is personified in the form of the god Eros who is frequently depicted as Aphrodite's attendant.⁴ While Aphrodite played a significant role in the circumstances that brought about the Trojan War,⁵ the Homeric Aphrodite is distinctly unwarlike. In fact, Aphrodite's ineptitude for warfare borders on being humorous. To start with, Aphrodite is easily manipulated by Hera to aid in Hera's seduction of Zeus during the *Dios Apate*.⁶ Aphrodite's Homeric epithet, φιλομμειδῆς,⁷ smile-loving, is further employed during this episode to illustrate how harmless the Homeric Aphrodite is. By trusting Hera's intentions, despite them being on opposing sides of the Trojan War, Aphrodite illustrates her inability to act with μῆτις,⁸ a quality treasured by the war-loving Greeks.⁹ Furthermore, Athena, the goddess who perhaps embodies μῆτις more so than any other deity, blatantly disrespects Aphrodite. When the gods descend upon the battlefield to assist their favorites, Athena brutally strikes Aphrodite, causing her to be sprawled in pain on the ground.¹⁰ Aphrodite is

2 Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 152.

3 Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Augustus Taber Murray. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. London, England: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1919), 22.444. *Odyssey* orders for Telemachus, Philoetius, and Eumaeus to kill the slave girls of his home, telling them to strike them with swords until they forget Ἀφροδίτης. Her name in this context is used to mean sexual love.

4 Monica Cyrino. *Aphrodite, Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World*, (London, England: Routledge, 2010), 45

5 Homer, *Iliad*. ed. David B. Monro and Thomas W. Allen (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1902), 24.29. It was Aphrodite's promise to give Helen to Paris in exchange for Eris' golden apple that started the Achaean siege of Troy.

6 Homer, *Iliad*, 14.199. In this episode, Hera lies to Aphrodite about her purpose in obtaining the magic girdle and Aphrodite readily believes her.

7 *Ibid.* 14.211.

8 *Mêtis*, which is essentially cunning intelligence.

9 Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant. *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1-54.

10 Homer, *Iliad* 21.423.

humiliated by Athena, further highlighting her incompetence in warfare.

The most striking example of how unsuited the Homeric Aphrodite is for warfare is her interaction with Diomedes in Book V of the *Iliad*. Athena specifically asks him to wound Aphrodite if he is given the opportunity to do so while telling him to steer clear of fighting any other god.¹¹ Athena's decision to send a mortal to wound Aphrodite not only shows the lack of respect Athena possesses for Aphrodite but also the perception that Aphrodite is inherently weak—even a mortal could harm her with little consequence. After Aphrodite prevents Diomedes from killing her son Aeneas, Diomedes remembers Athena's instructions and responds by throwing his spear to easily wound Aphrodite.¹² As if his physical degradation of her was not enough, Diomedes proceeds to verbally humiliate Aphrodite. He scolds her for participation in the war, asking her if it is “not then enough that you lead astray women without warcraft.”¹³ Furthermore, he calls her an ἄναλκις who does not belong on the battlefield. Her part in causing the Trojan War by leading Helen to Paris is reprehensible, but what Diomedes, and to a larger extent the *Iliad*, takes a bigger offense to is Aphrodite's presence on the battlefield. Aphrodite is a god without warcraft,¹⁴ further enforcing that her domain is elsewhere. Zeus soon finds out about Aphrodite's disgrace on the battlefield. Rather than comforting his daughter, Zeus supports the mere mortal that wounded her. Zeus echoes Diomedes' view that Aphrodite should not concern herself with war, vindicating Diomedes' actions and explicitly telling Aphrodite that she should only be concerned with the lovely secrets of marriage.¹⁵ War is unmistakably not one of the Homeric Aphrodite's spheres of influence. Her τιμή¹⁶ is then solely attractiveness, sex, and deception. Aphrodite can be bothersome, causing immense damage through her meddling in others' love affairs¹⁷, but she is never directly dangerous.

11 Homer, *Iliad* 5.130

12 Ibid. 5.338.

13 Ibid. 5.349.

14 Ibid. 5.331.

15 Homer, *Iliad*, 5.426. The lovely secrets of marriage essentially means sex.

16 For the context of this paper, I chose to translate τιμή as spheres of influence in order

to emphasize that making Aphrodite useless in battle restricts her influence over war.

17 Ibid. 3.373-447. She saves Paris from imminent death at the hands of Menelaus and whisks him away to Helen. Although the war would have ended with Paris' death, Aphrodite uses deception and her godly powers to prolong the war.

Homer's portrayal of Aphrodite remains influential to our views of her today as Homer's epics are the primary mythopoetic sources we have access to on the gods from Archaic Greece. It is possible, however, that the Homeric representation of Aphrodite deliberately asserts the predominant Ionian¹⁸ interpretation of Aphrodite as vexing but not a real threat. While Zeus' claim that Aphrodite does not belong on the battlefield seems to initially be indicative of her weakness, this episode can be interpreted as evidence of Aphrodite's strength.¹⁹ It is possible to read this scene as a conscious attempt to restrict Aphrodite's τιμή. Although Aphrodite is deliberately portrayed as weak in the Trojan War, it is unclear why a goddess deemed to be so weak would feel comfortable enough on the battlefield to willingly run in and save her son.²⁰ Even after being told to abstain from flying onto the battlefield, Aphrodite is quick to save Ares after he is wounded in combat.²¹ Although her warrior attributes were downplayed and were even considered humorous by the time she became an Olympian goddess, it is clear that Aphrodite does not shy away from being on the battlefield.

At times, the language of Homer reveals the underlying power of Aphrodite that Homer elsewhere seems to mask. The concept ofμίξις, mingling, is used by ancient Greek historiographers such as Herodotus²² to illustrate how bodies merge during sexual intercourse.²³ This noun and its associated verbμίγνυμι connect two very different areas of significance in Homer's work, those of love and war. It connects the two spheres by implying that both concepts share the necessity of physical connection. This verb is specifically used when an opponent is dismembered, with their body parts falling and mixing with the ground²⁴ or when two people are insinuated to have sex.²⁵ The two areas of sexuality and violence come together to reveal some of the crucial aspects that contribute to the nature of this complex goddess. If

18 For the context of this paper, I chose to translate τιμή as spheres of influence in order to emphasize that making Aphrodite useless in battle restricts her influence over war.

19 Kassandra Jackson, *Father-Daughter Dynamics in the Iliad: The role of Aphrodite in Zeus' Regime in Brill's Companion to Aphrodite* ed. A. C. Smith and S. Pickup. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2010), 156

20 Cyrino, *Aphrodite*, 122

21 Homer, *Iliad*, 21.41

22 Herodotus. *The Histories*. trans. Alfred D. Godley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1919), 1.203, 4.172

23 Cyrino, *Aphrodite*, 85

24 *Iliad* 3.385, 4.456, 13.286, 21.469, 10.457; *Odyssey* 22.329

25 *Iliad* 3.445, 6.165, 9.225 14.295, 15.33, 24.131; *Odyssey* 1.433, 5.126, 11.268, 15.420, 22.445

Aphrodite is the goddess of sexuality, as she so clearly is in Homer²⁶, war is inherently related to her realm. Where there is Aphrodite, there is *μίγνυμι*, and where there is *μίγνυμι*,²⁷ there is both love and war. Desire leads to both making war and making love, and, as the goddess of desire, it is only apt that Aphrodite have warlike features.

INANNA AND ASTARTE: TWO GODDESSES BEHIND APHRODITE

In order to investigate the warlike qualities that Aphrodite may have possessed outside of Homer, we shall first delve into how the worship of Aphrodite evolved. This study will examine Aphrodite's close ties to the two goddesses who most influenced her worship: the ancient Near Eastern goddesses Inanna and Astarte. In order to analyze how Aphrodite's relationship to war changed, we shall first examine the *τιμή* of these two goddesses.

We can conclude that Aphrodite descends in part from these two goddesses, because worship of Aphrodite is widely assumed to have been post-Mycenaean, after 1100 BCE, given that her name is noticeably absent from Linear B inscriptions.²⁸ Since Aphrodite is a prominent figure in the *Iliad*, her worship is also assumed to have begun before 762 BCE, when the *Iliad* is thought to have been formally codified. Considering this, we can assume that the worship of Aphrodite became prevalent between 1000 BCE, at the earliest, and 712 BCE²⁹, at the latest. This coincides with the introduction of the cult of Semitic goddess Astarte to Cythera and Cyprus.³⁰ Aphrodite is the quintessential deity of both these cities, with the goddess being worshiped by the epithets Cytherea and Cypris, so it is understandable that Aphrodite began to be worshipped in Greece in those two islands first. Herodotus, the father of historiography, was the first person to record that the religious community of Aphrodite originated in Phoenicia. He described the temple of Aphrodite Ourania³¹ in Syria as “the most ancient of all temples

²⁶ *Odyssey* 22.444

²⁷ Cyrino, *Aphrodite*, 90

²⁸ Stephen Brunet et al. *Anthology of Classical Myth* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 443.

²⁹ Eric Lewin Altschuler et al., “Linguistic evidence supports date for Homeric epics”

BioEssays 35, no. 5 (February 2013): 419

³⁰ Hesiod: *Theogony, Works and Days*, edited by Solmsen: (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1990) I.203

³¹ οὐρανίης, Ourania, translates to “The Heavenly One” and is one of the major epithets of Aphrodite. This epithet is to be discussed further later in this paper.

belonging to the goddess; from the land of Syria.³² Pausanias echoes this view in the 2nd century CE that “the first men to establish [Aphrodite’s] cult were the Assyrians, after the Assyrians the Paphians at Cyprus and the Phoenicians...the Phoenicians taught the worship of Aphrodite to the people of Kythera³³”. From these two historiographic accounts, we learn that ancient Greek writers considered the cult of Aphrodite in Cyprus and Kythera to be in contact with ancient Near East religious traditions. Particularly, the cult of Aphrodite was considered to have been imported from the cult of one goddess in particular: Astarte.³⁴ The names Astarte and Aphrodite are used interchangeably in Byzantine scholarship,³⁵ and Astarte, the Phoenician goddess of sexuality and warfare among other things, possesses a striking amount of similarities with Aphrodite in both iconography and worship.³⁶ Just as the cult of Aphrodite derived from Astarte, the cult of Astarte drew upon the worship of the Sumerian Inanna.³⁷ In order to dissect the relationship of Astarte and Aphrodite to war, we shall first trace Inanna’s worship as a warrior goddess, a goddess of sexuality, and, most importantly, a goddess of change.

INANNA: THE ANDROGYNOUS GODDESS OF SEXUALITY AND WAR

The Sumerian goddess Inanna is widely considered to be one of the most important deities in Ancient Mesopotamia. She was the goddess of sexuality and was famed for her beauty, just like the Homeric Aphrodite. Her association to war, however, was just as important to her characterization as her relationship to sexuality was. When her worship was adopted by the Assyrians, Akkadians, and Babylonians, Inanna became known as the goddess Ishtar. According to Hallo and van Dijk in *The Exaltation of Inanna*, it is possible that Sargon of Akkad, after conquering Sumer, equated the Sumerian goddess with the existing Akkadian goddess Ishtar to create religious unity. From that point forward, the two goddesses began to be regarded as the same deity after extensive syncretism. For the purposes of this paper, the name Inanna will be used to refer to the goddess in her Sumerian form while the name

32 Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.105

33 Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, translated by William H. Samuel and Henry A. Ormerod vol 2 (London, England: W. Heinemann), 1.14.7

34 Cyrino. *Aphrodite*, 73

35 Stephanie L. Budin, “A Reconsideration of the Aphrodite-Ashtart Syncretism” *Nu-men* 51, no.2 (2004), 96

36 Cyrino. *Aphrodite*, 59

37 Ibid.

Ishtar will be used to refer to the goddess in her Assyrian, Akkadian, and Babylonian forms. It is essential to remember that these two names essentially refer to the same deity.

Inanna's importance as a fertility goddess is a continuation of the importance of fertility to prehistoric Mesopotamia. For example, there are early depictions in the form of female figurines with overly stressed sexual organs in the ancient Near East.³⁸ The depiction of this goddess seems to emphasize the idea of nudity, particularly female nudity, in prehistoric Mesopotamia as analogous to power.³⁹ From this example, it can be inferred that the first fertility figures were associated with sexuality, power, and motherhood, and Murray establishes three different kinds of fertility figures that correspond to these characteristics: personified yoni, divine woman, and personified yoni. These three different categories correspond to child, virginity, and sexual functions.⁴⁰ Murray describes that Ishtar belongs to the "divine woman" class of fertility figures; she represents the ideal young women whom men desire. Inanna never gives birth, and she is never associated with motherhood. Her status as a fertility goddess is then about the potential she has as a young goddess. Inanna's sexuality is an essential part of her characterization. While the naive Inanna of Sumerian literature differs greatly from the femme fatale Inanna in the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, both are portrayed as immensely sexual beings. The young Inanna who asks, "As for me, the young woman, who will plow my vulva?"⁴¹ is just as desirous as the Inanna who tells Gilgamesh "Let us enjoy your strength, so put your hand and touch our vulva!"⁴² As the goddess of sexuality and love, Inanna is heavily involved in rituals regarding potency, and her relationship to sexuality is continued in war. One peace-treaty calls on Inanna to punish all who would break the treaty, saying "may Ishtar, the goddess of men, the lady of women, take away their 'bow,' [causing] their sterility."⁴³

38 Yosef Garfinkel, *The Goddess of Sha'ar HaGolan. Excavations at a Neolithic Site in Israel*, (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2004)

39 Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and representation in Mesopotamia* (London: Routledge, 2001), 81

40 Margaret A. Murray, "Female Fertility Figures" in *The Journal of The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 64 (1934): 94.

41 Diane Wolkstein and Samuel N. Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (New York City, New York: Harper Perennial, 1983), 37.

42 Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 79.

43 Johanna H. Stuckey, "Queen of Heaven and Earth: Inanna-Ishtar of Mesopotamia." *Goddesses in World Culture: Volume 2, Eastern Mediterranean and Europe*, ed. Patricia

Ishtar was just as fond of making war as she was of making love. When the god Enki creates civilization and assigns duties for all the gods and goddesses to perform, he assigns Inanna the task of war.⁴⁴ “Battle is a feast” to her and, as a god of war, Inanna revels in the chaos of warfare.⁴⁵ This association with warfare means that Inanna is the source of human conflict and destruction. Thus, her dangerous characteristics are frequently outlined in prayers, most notably in “Star of the battle cry, who can make brothers who have lived together in harmony fight each other... You, Ishtar, thus always finish men off.⁴⁶” Ishtar is terrifying to all around her in her warrior aspect. In the Akkadian “Song of Agušaya,” it is said that “In her heart [Inanna] schemed battle... she is more fearsome than a bull, her clamor like its raging.⁴⁷” During the “Song of Agušaya,” Inanna’s aggression and battle frenzy becomes so overwhelming that she terrifies both the humans and gods around her. Echoing her fearsome portrayal in the Agušaya poem, in a fragment entitled the “Self-Praise of Ishtar,” Inanna refers to herself as a destroyer, saying “I rain battle down like flames in the fighting, I make heaven and earth shake with my cries.⁴⁸”

Because war was a masculine occupation in ancient Mesopotamia and women were unable to participate in fighting, it was necessary to reconcile Inanna’s warrior aspects with her widespread worship without infringing upon the gender roles in Mesopotamia.⁴⁹ Therefore, Ishtar was treated as male in her warrior aspect. In texts, Ishtar often refers to herself as both female and male.⁵⁰ For example, Ishtar says, “I am a woman but verily I am an exuberant man”⁵¹ and in the Agušaya poem,

Monahagen (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger Publishers, 2011), 26.

44 Bendt Alster, “An Aspect of Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta” *Revue d’Assyriologie et d’archéologie orientale* 67, no. 2 (1973): 107.

45 Rivkah Harris, “Inanna-Ishtar as paradox and a coincidence of opposites.” *History of Religions* 30, no 3 (February 1991): 261.

46 Erica Reiner and Hans G. Guterbock, “The Great Prayer to Ishtar and Its Two Versions from Boğazköy,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 21 (1967): 259.

47 Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 1996), 84.

48 Foster, *Before the Muses*, 77.

49 Philippe Clancier, “Hommes guerriers et femmes invisibles, le choix des scribes dans le Proche-Orient ancien” *Femme, Genre, Histoire* 39 (2014): 19.

50 Sumerian has gender neutral pronouns while Akkadian, the language of the Agušaya poem, has many gender distinctions. We must be careful to not impose the modern standards of gender identity on Inanna, so since modern scholarly research uses female pronouns to discuss Inanna, I used the same in this paper.

51 Mark E. Cohen, “The Incantation Hymn: Incantation or Hymn?” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95, no 4 (1975): 606.

Ishtar refers to herself as both “she who slays the inhabited world” and “he who slays,”⁵² illustrating her androgynous nature when she is in battle. Furthermore, in this hymn Inanna is described as “dancing the whirl as a man does,”⁵³ reveling in her bloodlust. In honor of her taming that occurs later in the “Song of Agušaya,” the god Ea instituted an Akkadian festival of the “whirling dance.” This hymn provided an origin for the whirling dance celebrating the Inanna’s belligerent character and, importantly, this whirling dance was performed solely by men,⁵⁴ further illustrating the relationship between the manly side of Inanna and war. Warrior kings like the Assyrians, for whom Ishtar was a personal deity,⁵⁵ additionally emphasized Ishtar’s masculine qualities in order to justify the worship of her warlike qualities. For example, the king Ashurbanipal described Inanna as “bearded with a beard [like the male deity Ashur].”⁵⁶ Whenever Inanna is described with masculine qualities, she is additionally described with feminine qualities. For example, in addition to being called bearded, she is called the “Illustrious one of the goddesses.”⁵⁷ Essentially, her masculine qualities are added to her feminine qualities when she is worshipped as a warrior. Her androgynous nature is central to the worship of the goddess, so Ishtar is ultimately both female and male.

While the sexual aspects of Inanna emphasize her feminine side and the warrior aspects her masculine side, the role of the goddess in legitimizing political power was not restricted to her masculine, combative aspect. Inanna plays a significant role in legitimizing political power, both through sex and through war. Many third-millennium rulers described themselves as her spouse, pointing to Inanna’s significant agency in wielding political power.⁵⁸ The most important example of this practice was the Sumerian Sacred Marriage ceremony. In early Sumerian texts, the annual sacred marriage ceremony between the priestess of Inanna (representing Inanna in the flesh) and the king (representing Inanna’s husband Dumuzi) played a large role in ensuring Sumer’s

52 Foster, *Before the Muses*, 77.

53 Harris, “Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox,” 267.

54 Foster, *Before the Muses*, 90.

55 Stuckey, “Queen of Heaven,” 26.

56 James Meek Theophile, A Hymn to Ishtar, *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, 26 no.3 (1910): 160

57 Theophile, A Hymn, 160.

7 Joan G. Westenholz, “King by Love of Inanna - an image of female empowerment?” *Journal of Gender Studies in Antiquity* 1 (2000): 75.

agricultural prosperity.⁵⁹ There is limited information about what happened during this ceremony, but it can be understood partially by the Iddin-Dagan Hymn.⁶⁰ According to this hymn, the two-day-long ritual invokes Inanna during a grand parade, and after opulent celebrations throughout the kingdom, the consummation of the marriage takes place. This act of intercourse between the earthly manifestations of Inanna and Dumuzi is notably described in agricultural terms, demonstrating the close relationship between Inanna and her role as a fertility goddess. In the poem “The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi,” Inanna uses extensive agricultural metaphors to describe her need to have sex, saying “my untilled land lies fallow.”⁶¹ Dumuzi is further described as the “lettuce planted by the water” who “sprouted” and “burgeoned” for Inanna.⁶² When Inanna, the fertility goddess, became an essential feature of politics, her association with fertility remained significant. She is a powerful goddess because of her associations with sexuality and fertility. In the sacred marriage rite, the kingdom gained fertility, and Inanna gained pleasure. Inanna served the empire and the empire served Inanna, emphasizing her importance to Sumer.

Inanna being the goddess of both fertility and war, fundamentally the goddess of birth and death, appears to be contradictory. However, Inanna as the goddess of transformation “is the dynamic principle of change,”⁶³ so her duality is intentional. For example, in “Inanna and the God of Wisdom,”⁶⁴ Inanna is a young goddess yearning to gain more knowledge for the benefit of herself and Sumer, while in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*,⁶⁵ Ishtar is the femme fatale goddess who is spurned by the

59 The king and Inanna/Ishtar’s priestess were essentially vessels through whom Inanna blessed the kingdom, activating the fertile cycle and allowing for a bountiful harvest. Through this ceremony, power was transmitted from the divine Inanna to the earthly kingdom by the king who acts as the mediator between the two spheres.

60 Philip Jones, “Embracing Inanna: Legitimation and Mediation in the Ancient Mesopotamian Sacred Marriage Hymn Iddin-Dagan” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123 (2003): 293

61 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, 37

62 *Ibid.*, 38

63 Pirjo Lapinkivi, *The Sumerian Sacred Marriage in the Light of Comparative Evidence* (Helsinki, Finland: University of Helsinki Press, 2004), 15.

64 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, 11-18. In this story, Inanna gains the sacred mes, decrees of the divine that essentially help humankind thrive. The young Inanna tricks the Enki, the God of Wisdom, into giving her the mes by getting him drunk. She brings mes to the people of Sumer, demonstrating that she will look over them. By doing so, Inanna gains power for herself in the form of their favor and she cements herself as their most beloved deity.

65 Martin Puchner et al., *The Norton Anthology of World Literature 4th edition Volume A*, (New York City, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 93-122. Here, Ishtar

object of her affections. Additionally, Inanna had no set backstory or familial relationships in different myths,⁶⁶ with her popularity leading to different uses of her favor. Her inherent contradictions are called to attention when Ea tells Inanna “You have thrown into confusion the threads which have been ordered...you organize those threads which bring confusion...Inanna, you have destroyed what should not have been destroyed, you have made what should not have been made.”⁶⁷ Inanna is both a creator and a destroyer as the goddess of sexuality and battle. Her myths and depictions constantly changed to allow for her wide range of characteristics. The depiction of Inanna, like we will see later with the depiction of Aphrodite, grew and changed, depending on the stage of her evolution.

ASTARTE: THE HUNTRESS AND GODDESS OF SEXUALITY

After Inanna, the major deity that influenced the cult of Aphrodite was the Semitic goddess Astarte, whose worship spread from Ugarit to Egypt and, later, Phoenicia. References to Astarte first appear in the Ugarit, an ancient port city in modern Syria that reached its height around 1450 and 1190 BCE.⁶⁸ West Semitic textual evidence equates Astarte, the Canaanite goddess, with Ishtar,⁶⁹ making clear that Astarte descends from Inanna/Ishtar.

Similar to Ishtar, Astarte has clear associations with sexuality and war as the Ugaritic texts exalt her beauty and position as a fertility goddess. Astarte is described as “raising a shadow...like the stars”⁷⁰ because of her brilliant appearance. The god Baal desires Astarte, specifically for her beauty showcased in the previous sentence, and Astarte is most notably worshipped as a beautiful, hunting warrior-goddess.⁷¹ The original meaning of the name Astarte in the Hebrew form Ashtor-eth was “that which issues from womb”⁷² —an appropriate name for

attempts to seduce Gilgamesh into marrying her. Gilgamesh refuses, citing her abandonment of her previous lovers and her infamous violent behavior.

66 Pirjo Lapinvinki, *The Neo-Assyrian Myth of Ishtar's Descent and Resurrection*, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Publishing Company, 2010), 35.

67 Alster, “An Aspect of Enmerkar,” 108.

68 Marguerite Yon, “Ugarit: 6,000 Years of History” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 63, no. 68 (December 2000): 189

69 Rüdger Schmitt, “Astarte, Mistress of Horses, Lady of the Chariot: The Warrior Aspect of Astarte” *Die Welt des Orients* 43, no. 2 (2013): 215.

6 David T. Sugimoto, *Transformation of a Goddess: Ishtar-Astarte-Aphrodite*, (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014): 48.

71 Sugimoto, *Transformation*, 64

72 Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 57

the inducer of fertility. Another epithet for Astarte at Ugarit is “Astarte of the field”, hinting at an association with fertility. In the same vein, a different epithet Astarte possesses is “she who is pregnant but cannot give birth.”⁷³ Just like Inanna, Astarte does not have children despite being a fertility goddess. Astarte’s young age, coupled with her fertility association and her inability to give birth, places her firmly in the “Divine Woman” category along with Inanna.

Having established Astarte’s position as a renowned goddess of sexuality, we shall now analyze Astarte’s relationship with war and hunting. The religious iconography of Astarte indicates that she is depicted armed in most cases—a clear testament to her warlike character.⁷⁴ Astarte was well-known for being a hunting goddess, with Ugaritic religious inscriptions describing her as “Astarte the huntress.”⁷⁵ Additionally, inscriptions in Emar⁷⁶, written in Akkadian, refer to her as “Astarte of Battle,”⁷⁷ making it clear the battle is one of her domains. In both Ugarit and Phoenicia,⁷⁸ there was a similar stigma against women in battle, just as there was in Sumer and Babylon, the centers of Inanna’s worship. This is notably seen in “The Legend of Aqht.”⁷⁹ While it is explicitly clear that human females are not known to hunt (as Aqht’s question “now do womenfolk hunt?” makes clear), the text solves the problem of Astarte’s sex by disregarding it. The text makes it clear that Astarte is not like a typical woman. She is the exception to the rule that women should not take part in hunting or battle because her godly status makes her not subject to the same stigmas as women.. Whereas Inanna/Ishtar had to become masculine in order for her warlike qualities to be accepted, Astarte’s gender is ignored in order for her to remain a belligerent goddess.

During the first millennium BCE, Astarte retained her status as a war goddess but rose to the rank of a major deity, becoming associated with kingship and power. An engraving from the 6th century BCE on

73 Christian Leitz et al., *Lexikon Der Ägyptischen Götter Und Götterbezeichnungen Band VIII* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters Publishers, 2003)

74 Bob Becking, Karel van der Toorn, Pieter Willem van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 1999), 110.

75 Schmitt, “Astarte, Mistress of Horses,” 216.

76 An archeological site in northern Syria with a significant number of Ugaritic texts.

77 Izak Cornelius, *The Many Faces of the Goddess: The Iconography of the Syro-Palestinian Goddesses Anat, Astarte, Qedeshet, and Asherah c. 1500-1000 BCE* (Göttingen, Germany: Academic Press Fribourg Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2004), 93.

78 The most renowned centers of Astarte’s worship.

79 Jonathan Yogev and Shamir Yona, *Third and Last: Epigraphic Notes on the Ugaritic Tablet KTU 1.19*, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136 no.4 (2016), 820.

the tomb of King Tabnit of Sidon describes the king as a priest of Astarte,⁸⁰ portraying a similar strong connection between the king and the goddess as seen between the Sumerian kings and Inanna. Astarte's association with war continued through this period as evidenced by the treaty of Esarhaddon (680-669 BCE). In this treaty, the Baal of Tyre says, "May Astarte break your bow in the thick of battle, and have you crouch at the feet of [your enemy]."⁸¹ This invocation of Astarte is significant because only Astarte was invoked in battle against Tyre's enemies; other gods such as Baal, Eshmun, and Melqart were invoked to simply raise hostile winds against the opposing force. This inscription demonstrates Astarte's importance, and most modern scholars agree that Astarte was an important deity all throughout Phoenicia. Her invocation for vengeance on the kingdom's enemies shows the power over warfare that she continued to possess throughout the Phoenician period.⁸²

Ultimately, to venture into Astarte's domain means experiencing the whole range of human emotions. As a fertility goddess, she has domain over birth and love; as a warrior goddess, she has domain over death. Astarte is therefore a goddess of transformation. As seen with Inanna, these wide varieties of human experiences with love and war seem contradictory, but they are as natural for Astarte as they were for Inanna. Sexuality and war exist side-by-side in Astarte's worship.

THE TRANSITION FROM ASTARTE INTO THE WORSHIP OF APHRODITE

When the cult of Astarte was first introduced to ancient Greece and became the cult of Aphrodite, the close relationship between sex and war continued in certain places and her Near Eastern origin continued. For instance, Aphrodite's association with Troy recalls her status as an immigrant from the East, even though Aphrodite is a fully assimilated member of the Olympian pantheon by Homer's time.⁴

In order to determine if other writers perceived Aphrodite with a larger number of Eastern associations, we shall compare Homer's portrayal of Aphrodite to Hesiod's. Although Homer and Hesiod were contemporaries, it is widely accepted by scholars that Homer and Hesiod do not always agree with each other.⁵ Nowhere is this more evident

80 Schmitt, "Astarte, Mistress of Horses," 217

81 Simo Parpola and Kazuko Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (Helsinki, Finland: Helsinki University Press, 1988), 27.

82 Budin, 2003 (245-50)

83 Homer, *Iliad* 3: 374; 5: 312

84 William Sale, "The Dual Vision of the 'Theogony,'" *Arion*, no.4 (1965), 668

than their respective birth myths for the goddess. The Hesiodic Aphrodite is born from the sea foam that arose after Ouranos' testicles, which were forcibly cut off by his son, Chronos, fell into the sea.⁸⁵ Once again indicating the Eastern influences on Aphrodite, the Hesiodic Aphrodite's birth myth parallels the castration of Anu, Inanna's sky-god father.⁸⁶ The violent circumstances surrounding Aphrodite's birth and the incorporation of Sumerian parallels demonstrate that Hesiod perceived Aphrodite as an independent "Eastern" goddess. Hesiod then goes on to describe Aphrodite's *τιμή*, saying "Virginal sweet-talk, lovers' smiles and deceits and all of the gentle pleasures of sex"⁸⁷ are under her sphere of influence. This echoes the Homeric view of Aphrodite being solely the goddess of sexuality as seen earlier in the Dios Apate. The Hesiodic view of Aphrodite, while ultimately agreeing with Homer that Aphrodite is solely the goddess of sexuality, sheds light on the danger associated with Aphrodite. Since Aphrodite is undoubtedly the goddess of sexuality, her violent birth myth portrays an equivalence between sex and danger.⁸⁸ The Hesiodic Aphrodite is not associated with war as her Eastern counterparts once were, but she and her domain of sexuality are still associated with violence.

As the daughter of Ouranos, the Hesiodic Aphrodite is two generations older than Olympian Zeus. Therefore, we can assume that the circumstances of her birth are unrelated to him, but in the *Iliad* Aphrodite is stated to be Zeus' daughter.⁸⁹ In this text, we see her mother, Dione,⁹⁰ whose name is "a feminine form of the Zeus' alternative name Δίος,"⁹¹ comforting Aphrodite after she was wounded by Diomedes. By placing Aphrodite's lineage under Zeus, Homer places Aphrodite's powers of love and sexuality under Zeus' domain. By changing her birth myth, Homer takes away from the inherent danger associated with sex as seen in Aphrodite's violent birth myth. Sex is no longer dangerous; both Aphrodite and her powers have been tamed by Zeus' firm control. As an Olympian, Aphrodite must be submissive to Zeus, and the Helleni-

85 Hesiod, *Theogony*, 190.

86 The castration of Inanna's father Anu by Kumarbi in the *Enuma Elish*.

87 Hesiod, *Theogony* 203-6, trans. Lombardo, 1993

88 This very literal birth myth might be a transparent allusion to Hesiod's own attitude to sexual relationships. As seen in his myth about Pandora's box (*Works and Days* 58-104), Hesiod was apprehensive towards sexuality and his bias against displays of sexuality, equating them with danger, may be coming through here.

89 *Iliad* 5.429.

90 *Iliad* 5.371.

91 Mark Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2013), 128.

zation of Aphrodite makes an effort to strip Aphrodite of her associations with the dangerous, Eastern goddesses she descended from. We can speculate that Homer actively omitted Aphrodite's ancient origins from Ouranos, so she posed less of a threat to Zeus and his authority. As seen in the introduction, her almost comical inadequacy in war demotes her from the powerful Eastern goddess of war and sexuality to a weak goddess of sexuality.

Despite these attempts to stop Aphrodite's association with war, her association as a warrior goddess continued in various local cults. Notably, Aphrodite was worshipped as a war goddess in Cythera, Corinth, Sparta, Caria, and Epidaurus, where researchers unearthed armed statues of the goddess.⁹² The most enduring association with war that she retained was her romantic relationship with Ares. Ares is notably the god of untamed and violent war and, during the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, Aphrodite is frequently represented as Ares' wife. Both an amphora from Naxos dated to approximately 670-600 BCE, with the oldest extant inscription of the goddess's name, and fragments of a contemporary Cycladic amphora show Aphrodite in a wedding carriage with Ares.⁹³ In the famously militaristic Sparta, Aphrodite is worshipped as a war goddess alongside Ares, with the epithet of Aphrodite Ἀρεία.⁹⁴ While it is not clear whether Aphrodite was a war goddess in her own right, worshipped as a war goddess because of her paramour Ares, or warlike because all deities in Sparta had martial characteristics, her clear association with war is shown by her relationship to Ares.⁹⁵ This is the version of Aphrodite's marital relationship shown by Hesiod; in Hesiod's *Theogony*, Aphrodite is clearly the consort of Ares.⁹⁶

In the *Odyssey*, however, Homer describes Aphrodite as the wife of Hephaestus,⁹⁷ even though in his *Iliad* Hephaestus is married to Charis, one of the Graces.⁹⁸ Homer narrates an episode where Ares and Aphrodite, who have been having an affair, are entrapped in a magical net by Hephaestus. Aphrodite and Ares are then the object of uncontrollable laughter among the gods with their union being portrayed as hilarious

1 Miroslav Marcovich, "From Ishtar to Aphrodite" *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 30, no. 2 (1996): 48

93 Marcovich, "From Ishtar" 48

94 Pausanias. *Description of Greece* 3.17.5

95 Cyrino. *Aphrodite*, 126

96 *Theogony* 933

97 *Odyssey* 8.266-366

98 *Iliad* 18.382-3.

adultery.⁹⁹ While it is uncertain why Homer chose two different consorts for Hephaestus in both works, one can read this as an active effort to distance Aphrodite from war yet again by invalidating her relationship with Ares.

Moving forward from Homer and Hesiod's descriptions, we will analyze Ancient Greek mythopoetic depictions. In the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, Aphrodite is punished by Zeus to fall in love with a mere mortal, Anchises, and give birth to a son, Aeneas. Aphrodite's pregnancy by Anchises signals an extreme demotion in her power. One of the main characteristics of Inanna and Astarte was that they were extremely sexual, but they were known to never give birth. Most importantly, mortal love interests were not forced upon them—especially as a punishment. The reasoning behind their lack of children is apparent. Comparing Thetis and Achilles, it was a hardship for goddesses to bear mortal children, for then they have to directly deal with the unthinkable: death. Forcing a child upon Aphrodite, especially by a relatively weak mortal, is Zeus' ultimate punishment for her. She now has to deal with the consequences of caring for a mortal life. As soon as she realizes that she is with child, Aphrodite narrates that she knows that her power has been diminished.¹⁰⁰ This is yet another way that Aphrodite was brought under the control of Zeus.

While Aphrodite's association with war was deliberately left out by writers, it was thought that the androgynous Aphrodite,¹⁰¹ identified as Aphroditus, was possibly a reminder of Aphrodite's warlike nature—much in the same way Inanna's androgynous nature had been. A terracotta figurine found on Cyprus at Perachora and made in Corinth shows a bearded female rising from genitals that has been identified as Aphrodite rising from Ouranos.¹⁰² Aphroditus was honored with a ritual where people would cross-dress in their honor, demonstrating that she was a popular figure. Eventually, the popularity of Aphroditus waned as the completely feminine version of Aphrodite popular in mainstream worship became preferred. Traces of her cult are preserved in the later

99 *Odyssey* 8.255-360

100 *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, *Homeric Hymns*, 5.248-55

101 According to Sale (1961), Paeon of Amathus said that Aphrodite of Cyprus could take the shape of a man. Macrobius described the statue of Aphrodite in Cyprus as being bearded and having male genitals. Aristophanes knew of the existence of a androgynous deity called Aphroditos. Hesychius confirmed that Aphrodite was a hermaphrodite.

4 Williams Sale, "Aphrodite in the Theogony," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 92 (1961), 515

legends of Hermaphroditus.¹⁰³ Hermaphroditus later came to be regarded as the son of Hermes and Aphrodite,¹⁰⁴ a reminder of how Inanna's androgynous nature influenced Aphrodite. Both Aphrodite and her worship therefore cross gender lines, just as Inanna's once had.

Aphrodite retained the political associations that both Inanna and Astarte had, but she was not respected as a political figure as they were. In Plato's *Symposium*, the character Phaedrus discusses the differences between Aphrodite Οὐρανία, the "Heavenly Aphrodite," and Aphrodite Πάνδημος, the "Common Aphrodite."¹⁰⁵ Aphrodite Οὐρανία signified heavenly love, which was essentially the celestial love of body and soul. The love that she represented was purer and more spiritual. Πάνδημος, on the other hand, embodied common sensual pleasure. The love she embodied was more akin to lust. Her two-way split into Οὐρανία and Πάνδημος represents the schism that occurred throughout the development of Greek culture that split the common and profane from the sacred and spiritual. Heavenly and earthly love became polar opposites. The discourse then comes to the conclusion that Οὐρανία, the aspect of Aphrodite that was above sexual appeal, was superior to Πάνδημος; the sacred was preferred to the common.

It is important to not discredit Πάνδημος. Aphrodite Πάνδημος was a significant political deity in Athens in addition to presiding over earthly love, and her renowned association with politics is not mentioned at all in the *Symposium*, perhaps deliberately. This disregard of Πάνδημος may show a lack of respect to the political role that Πάνδημος played in Athenian politics. Πάνδημος' role as unifier of the Athenian people originated from the legend in which the mythological Theseus "united the many Athenian Parishes."¹⁰⁶ From here on, she remained an important political figure in Athens. Πάνδημος was often invoked to improve rhetoric and unite groups of people in common political agendas. The association with sexual love exists along with her political leanings and it is, perhaps, her universal appeal through embodying sexual love that allowed her to be such an effective uniter. Her political associations were not respected by writers such as Plato, because of her physicality. Whereas Inanna's sexuality contributed to

103 Nora Clark, *Aphrodite and Venus in Myth and Mimesis* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 381

104 Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, *Three books of Occult Philosophy* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2004): 495

105 Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9* trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1925), 178 A-180 B.

106 Pausanias. *History of Greece* 1.22.3

her political power, and Astarte's sexuality did not get in the way of her political power, Aphrodite Πάνδημος' sexuality actively causes her to be treated with less respect by Plato.

Despite the lack of veneration given to the thoroughly Hellenized Aphrodite Πάνδημος by Plato, she remains an extremely powerful deity who can use her influence over sexual love to lead people to ruin. The most notable portrayal of Aphrodite's terrifying anger is Euripides' *Hippolytus*. In this 5th century BCE Greek tragedy, Euripides chronicles one version of the myth, where Aphrodite, angered by Hippolytus shunning love and worshipping the chaste Artemis, causes Hippolytus' stepmother Phaedra to fall madly in love with him and try to seduce him.¹⁰⁷ The tragedy's opening word "Powerful,"¹⁰⁸ brought forth by an imagined narration from Aphrodite herself, makes it clear that Aphrodite is immensely powerful. The beginning lays the foundation for the theme of the play: Aphrodite's great power can be ruinous. When Hippolytus refuses to revere Aphrodite, he sets off a chain of events that lead to Phaedra's suicide and Hippolytus' eventual death organized by his own father, Theseus. Aphrodite's cruelty confirms her to be a dangerous deity, even without her lost warlike attributes. She is bloodthirsty and ruthless, similar to Ishtar in the "Song of Agūšaya," but instead of fighting she uses her ability to make people fall in love. Her status as being solely the goddess of sexuality and love does not take away from her fearsome nature. In fact, Aphrodite is effectively able to punish those whom she believes wronged her because of her domain, Πάνδημος, over sexuality.

VENUS: ROME'S MOTHER AND A COINCIDENTAL RETURN TO APHRODITE'S ROOTS AS A WARRIOR GODDESS

The worship of Aphrodite changed immensely from its starting with Inanna, and it is only expected that the worship of her Roman counterpart Venus naturally modified aspects of Aphrodite to better suit Roman tastes. Venus shares many traits with the Hellenistic Aphrodite, such as the Hesiodic origin story of being born from Ouranos and the relationship with Ares (or more aptly the Roman Mars). Nevertheless, it should first be stressed that the Venus of the Roman Republic was a

107 It is worth noting that Aphrodite punishes Artemis indirectly for her unwillingness to embrace love as Aphrodite does, and reveals the underlying rivalry between the two goddesses. Aphrodite and Artemis embody the opposing forces of sexuality and virginity and are effectively at war with each other here. Aphrodite and, therefore, sexuality win in this instance. 2 πολὺς taken from Euripides, *Hippolytus* trans. David Kovacs (Cambridge. Harvard University Press)

a different deity who was not equivalent to the Greek Aphrodite. Venus was the mother of Aeneas, the progenitor of Rome, which meant that she was one of the most important deities for the Romans. Venus regained the association with war that the Classical Aphrodite had lost, albeit through politics instead of fighting directly in the war. One example of this association was the temple that the Roman general Pompey dedicated to the specific aspect of Venus known as *Victrix*, “The Victorious” within his famously massive theater complex.¹⁰⁹ Here, Pompey’s temple illustrates his belief that Venus helped him win his battles and supports his martial successes. Refusing to be outdone by his long standing rival, Julius Caesar insisted upon glorifying his own, closer relationship to Venus. Since he was a member of the Julian *gens*, he could claim direct descent from Aeneas’ line, and he made sure to make the most of that familial association. Caesar’s forum in Rome was dedicated to Venus Genetrix—Venus the “Ancestress”—in order to emphasize his ancestral relationship to this powerful goddess.

It is during this time of increased importance for Venus Genetrix that the Romans highlighted her romantic relationship with the war god Mars, the father of Romulus, who became the direct founder of Rome, because this relationship brought together the two gods who were most responsible for founding the Roman Republic.¹¹⁰ Venus and Mars were the “Mater” and “Pater” of the Romans, respectively. The association of Venus with marriage and motherhood led to a new, widespread portrayal of Venus as the mother of Cupid, the Roman version of Eros. This was far from the popular view in a majority of Aphrodite’s worship. For example, in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, as discussed earlier, Eros is one of the most ancient Greek deities, having come into existence directly after Chaos, Gaia, and Tartarus.¹¹¹ The *Argonautica*’s view, however, appealed to Venus’ “Genetrix” character. Apollonius makes Eros the son of Aphrodite and Ares and, seeing how this fit with the Roman view of Venus as a mother and wife of Mars, the Romans popularized the notion of Cupid being Venus’ son. This later became the predominant portrayal of Venus and Cupid in mythology.¹¹² The newfound

109 Rachel Kousser, “Augustan Aphrodite: The Allure of Greek Art in Roman Visual Culture” in *Brill’s Companion to Aphrodite* ed. A. C. Smith and S. Pickup. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2010), 291

110 Carol E. Newlands, “Playing with Time: Ovid and the *Fasti*” *Cornell Studies in Classical Philology* 55 (1995): 104.

111 Hesiod: *Theogony, Works and Days*, edited by Solmsen. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1990) l.120

112 Cyrino, *Aphrodite*, 48-9

association did not just stop at Venus and Cupid, however. The maternal Venus “Genetrix” character flowed backwards from Venus’s characterization to Aphrodite, whom the Greeks began portraying with maternal symbolism as the mother of Eros.¹¹³

Aphrodite became more militaristic under the Roman Republic as well. The Romans’ new portrayals of a Venus that brought victory extended towards their portrayal of her Greek counterpart. One famous example of this occurrence was the general Sulla’s relationship with Aphrodite. He took his first Latin cognomen Felix, and translated it into Greek as ἐπαφρόδιτος, which essentially meant the beloved-of-Aphrodite. This suggests that Sulla wanted to portray himself as being under the favor of Aphrodite to gain the favor of Greek citizens in the Roman colonies.¹¹⁴ Sulla also sent gifts to the temple of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias, claiming that this particular form of the goddess had come to him in a dream and helped him win in a difficult battle.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, he dedicated his trophy, after his win at Chaironeia, to Aphrodite, Ares, and Nike, claiming that they were all the most important patrons of military success.¹¹⁶ Caesar also included Aphrodite extensively on his coins distributed through the Republic, and he received numerous honors depicting him as the son of Aphrodite and Ares, once again utilizing his family’s relationship to the goddess. Aphrodite became distinctly more warlike, and she was respected as an ally in victory. This was not a complete homecoming to Aphrodite’s previous warlike characteristics, however. Aphrodite had to play an acceptable role as a goddess’ role in war, so she never accompanied Roman soldiers directly on the battlefield, as Inanna or Astarte once had. She was a bringer of victory nonetheless, and many Greeks, after realizing Venus’ importance, would claim ancestral relations to the Trojans descended from Aeneas.¹¹⁷ This portrays an increase in Aphrodite’s importance even when she was worshipped outside of Rome. In the centuries following the Roman Republic and Empire, portrayals of Aphrodite in both art and literature were changed to resemble Venus.¹¹⁸ Aphrodite essentially became more Roman. While certain aspects of her worship were Roman inventions, such as the emphasis on her motherhood, her closer connections to warfare and politics recall the associations with

113 Ibid. 117

114 Kousser, “Augustan,” 292.

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid, 289.

117 Cyrino, *Aphrodite*, 289.

118 Cyrino, *Aphrodite*, 291.

both areas that Inanna and Astarte once had. Almost poetically, Venus' influences led to Inanna's and Astarte's warlike and politically powerful nature returning, albeit as an echo, in Aphrodite.

CONCLUSION

Aphrodite is a paradoxical goddess; this is natural given that she is a goddess of violence and of love. As her worship progressed from Inanna, to Astarte, to Aphrodite, she remained associated with war, fertility, and politics. Different cultures found different ways of portraying her complex character and reconciling her warlike characteristics with her sexuality. In Mesopotamia, Inanna became distinctly androgynous, splitting her warlike aspects from her sexual aspects by classifying them as different genders. In Phoenicia, Astarte's divinity meant that she was unlike any mortal woman; she was allowed to be warlike because her femininity did not matter. In Greece, Aphrodite's warlike characteristics were suppressed, leading to her portrayal as the distinctly unwarlike Homeric Aphrodite. Despite her apparent weakness in war in Homer, Aphrodite's warlike nature still shone through in the form of her violent origin story and her association with Ares in Hesiod and the Homeric Hymns. When Venus became a popular deity of the Roman Republic, her status as the powerful mother of Rome led to a remodeling of the worship of Aphrodite that, coincidentally, resembled the Eastern features she lost in her Hellenistic worship. Zeus' suggestion that she restrict her "τιμή" to solely attractiveness, sex, and deception is impossible.¹¹⁹ Aphrodite will never be reduced down to a single, set sphere of influence, because she is as varied of a god as any other. Multiplicity is an indispensable feature of any Greek god as, even within the same work, the gods can carry different features passed down from their various cults, attributes, and myths. Ultimately, the association with war and love is not as unfathomable as one may think. Just as Inanna and Astarte once were the goddess of both sexuality and warfare, perhaps Aphrodite's warlike aspects can be reconciled with her status as the "Goddess of Love."

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Descendiing God, Ascending Man:
A Study of the Mycenaean Gold Masks from Grave Circle A

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ABSTRACT

The Mycenaean gold masks from Grave Circle A have inspired a multitude of theories and debates, as generations of scholars attempted to explain their unique occurrence in Bronze Age Mediterranean civilizations. This paper argues that these gold masks were not portraits of their wearers but representations of stylized human faces, which lends credence to the theory that they were used as a form of funerary “cosmetic” in order to cover the decaying face of the dead, as well as a means by which to endow the dead with a second, more extraordinary life through metaphorically transforming their mortal flesh into imperishable gold. This postmortem transformation could have symbolized an ascension to divinity for the dead, an idea that the Mycenaean had learned from Minoan epiphany rituals. It is possible that the making of these funerary masks may have been a local invention or indirectly inspired by Egyptian sources, but a Cretan origin is equally possible and needs not to be refused on the ground that no funerary masks of such a kind appeared on that island. Although it may not be possible to ever completely solve the enigma of the ancient gold masks, this paper hopes to inspire further research by shedding some light on their functions and origins.

Ever since their discovery by Heinrich Schliemann in 1876, the gold masks of Mycenae have been the center of scholarly contentions.¹ The five of them were all discovered in Grave Circle A, with three from grave IV and two from grave V, but there is another mask made of electrum (a kind of gold-silver alloy) that was found in grave Γ of Grave Circle B, which is earlier in its date and less rich in grave goods than Grave Circle A. On the whole, the masks are divided into two groups: the “flat” masks, in which belongs the electrum mask, are more primitively made with triangular faces and “stitched” eyelashes, while the “round” masks, both of which came from Grave Circle A, are open-eyed, round-faced, and three-dimensional. The mask from grave V in Circle A known as “Agamemnon” is technically a “flat” mask, but it was manufactured with much greater artistic skill than the other ones.² Today, after more than a century, they still remain an unexplained and unique phenomenon in all Bronze Age Mediterranean cultures, since there existed no long-standing tradition of gold funerary masks that could give rise to the masks of Mycenae, and indeed there are no examples of gold funerary masks in Europe before the Archaic period apart from these masks.³ This paper will attempt to unravel some of their enigmas by offering a tentative interpretation of their purpose: these gold masks found at Grave Circle A at Mycenae were not portraits; instead, in addition to cosmetic use, they served as a technique to give the dead a second life, which likely connoted a postmortem transformation into divinity, an idea which Mycenaean may have adopted from Minoan epiphany ritual. Furthermore, this paper will suggest that Crete, despite having been rejected by some scholars as the origin of the gold masks, may have inspired the manufacture of funerary masks on the mainland.

First, it is clear that the gold masks cannot be portraits of the dead person wearing them. The two “flat” masks from Grave IV, together with the electrum mask from Grave Circle B, share the same features of eyebrows “furred together in an unbroken arc,” “stitched”-looking eyes, down-turned thin lips, and “ivy-leaf ears” (Fig. 1, 2).⁴ This alone suggests the adoption of a schematic portrayal of a human face instead of the depiction of real features. Schofield proposed that these resemblant masks could reflect kinship connection as well as a manufacturing

1 Schofield, *The Mycenaean*, 17. Musgrave, Neave, and Prag, “Seven Faces from Grave Circle B at Mycenae,” 109.

2 Musgrave, Neave, and Prag, “Seven Faces from Grave Circle B at Mycenae”, 108-9.

3 Despini, “Gold funerary masks,” 26.

4 Vermeule, *The Art of the Shaft Graves of Mycenae*, 11.

convention, and lamented that no facial reconstruction for the faces they covered could be attempted to clarify the issue.⁵ However, the hypothesis that these similarities might be realistic reflections of family resemblance, which makes the masks portraits, does not hold water on two grounds. First, the facial reconstruction for the presumed owner of the electrum mask in Grave Circle B demonstrates that his physical appearance does not correspond with the mask, which, as Musgrave, Neave and Prag observed, “cannot be a portrait in the sense of depicting this particular individual at all.”⁶ Contrary to Schofield’s view, although no facial construction is possible for the Grave Circle A skulls, it is enough to refute the kinship theory solely by pointing to the one in the group of similar masks that evidently does not depict the dead person’s appearance. Furthermore, the electrum mask is not found on the face of the dead, but laying far from it,⁷ and according to Hristova, the situation of its discovery shows that it is impossible for it to have fallen off from the skull or even the top of the coffin.⁸ Thus, in the case of the electrum mask, it appears highly unlikely that the facial characteristics represented on it were intended to be identified with an actual face. Therefore it is probable, despite the possibility of a change in the masks’ function overtime, that the same set of features on the two “flat” gold masks are not reflections of real faces as well.

The second ground for refutation is that these features indeed exhibit traces of manufacturing convention. Koepcke identified stylistic influence from an Aegean/Cycladic tradition in the “flat” masks, and saw their similarities as characteristic of standardized workshop products.⁹ A relief face on a third-millennium pithos from Kea plausibly suggests the Cycladic connection by the similarly knitted single eyebrow (Fig.3).¹⁰ However, the better example is an Aegean human head rhyton that looks exactly like a three-dimensional counterpart of the masks (Fig.4-6),¹¹ even the pointed chin of the rhythm corresponds with the triangular shape of the masks, which, as Musgrave et al. remarked, could reflect in fact stylistic concerns.¹² The two examples

5 Schofield, *The Mycenaean*, 40, 42.

6 Musgrave, Neave and Prag, “Seven Faces from Grace Circle B at Mycenae,” 120.

7 Musgrave, Neave and Prag, “Seven Faces from Grace Circle B at Mycenae,” 120.

8 Hristova, *Masks and People: Reconstructing the Early Mycenaean Funerary Ritual through Archaeological Images and Context*, 140-41.

9 Koepcke, “Zum Stil der Schachtgräbermasken”, 5-6, 12, quoted in Despini, 28 and Hristova, 173

10 Vermeule, “Myth and Tradition from Mycenae to Homer”, 112.

11 Vermeule, “Myth and Tradition from Mycenae to Homer”, 110-11.

12 Musgrave, Neave and Prag, “Seven Faces from Grace Circle B at Mycenae,” 120.

reveal an artistic tradition to portray the human face in a way similar to that on the “flat” masks, as shown by certain common features such as the merged eyebrows, and it is possible that these masks belong to the same tradition as well.

Some may point out that the arguments above for the “flat” masks are not immediately applicable to the round masks and the “beautiful mask,” because of their salient differences. However, since the “flat” masks are the more “primitive” ones made with inferior skill,¹³ one can consider them as the basic form on which the others develop, from which one can better discern the nature of the masks at their first introduction into the funerary sphere. Therefore, if they, the earliest ones, were not intended as portraits, it is likely that the others were not as well. Regarding the gold masks, Koepcke brought up the possibility that variation in forms (that is, both flat and round) denotes variation in manufacturing intention, but in view of outside Aegean parallels and the masks’ placement in mortuary context, he concluded that they were indeed made for the same purpose. His question as to “whether the craftsman making a mask knew about the existence of the rest”¹⁴ can also be answered indirectly with Vermeule’s observation that there could not be many craftsmen involved in the creation of the Shaft Grave artifacts, for which “half a dozen versatile men”¹⁵ would be enough. This suggests a close circle of artisans in which information such as who made what for whom would be passed around easily even across generations, so that it is unlikely that people who made the later masks did so in utter unawareness of the circumstances that led to the creation of their precedents.

After establishing that the masks from Grave Circles are not portraits, before one can proceed to discuss their true purpose, one must first recognize the need to distinguish the electrum mask from the gold masks. As mentioned above, the electrum mask, regarding its position in the grave, can in no ways be identified with an actual face (although there is a possibility that the original position was disturbed by subsequent interments in the same grave), which contrasts strongly with the gold masks placed directly over the face of the dead. Further, if one accepts the interpretation that it was originally stored in a wooden box,⁴

13 Musgrave, Neave and Prag, “Seven Faces from Grace Circle B at Mycenae,” 109.

14 Koepcke, 10, quoted in Hristova, 173

15 Vermeule, *The Art of the Shaft Graves of Mycenae*, 50.

16 Schofield, *The Myceneans*, 35. On detailed analysis about the electrum mask’s placement in Grave Gamma, see Hristova, 139-41, 176-77.

then the face on the mask not only bears no spiritual relation to the face of the dead man, but is not meant to be visible among the funerary assemblage at all. In any case, it could not be a part of the dead body. By contrast, the gold masks occupied such a prominent position on the face, that they were bound to be visually striking to someone who viewed (for example, during the period of prothesis/lying in state) the dead bodies in their full array, since their placement made them an essential and conspicuous component of the presentation. Therefore, despite their stylistic continuity, it is unlikely that comparable considerations dictate the employment of both the gold masks and the electrum mask in funerary context. For this reason, this paper will refrain from discussing the electrum mask along with the gold masks, and will concern itself mainly with the interpretation of the gold masks alone.

As stressed above, the fact that the gold masks are placed over the dead person's face is crucial to their interpretation. There are two important aspects of this placement: first, that the masks serve to cover the faces of the dead, and second, that the masks themselves provide a new kind of "faces". The obvious explanation for this substitution is that masks are practical devices for hiding the decaying flesh below to make the bodies more presentable. The ritual of prothesis, or lying in state, is perhaps what makes this practice particularly necessary, since it requires the body to be laid out during an extended period for others to view. The scene painted on a Tanagra larnax shows female mourners decking the body (Fig. 7), probably preparing it for such an occasion. Cavanagh and Mee also pointed out the parallel between weddings and funerals in their need to present the principal individuals "perfectly."¹⁷ And in the case of the funeral, a perfect, imperishable substitute face is arguably the most efficient and straightforward cosmetic to hide the deteriorating flesh, which is indeed a defect in appearance similar to an undesirable complexion that must be improved with rouge.

However, the masks also operate on a more conceptual level to help the process of separation of the dead from the living by giving them a new kind of "life". As Burkert summarized, the masks are "the most ancient means of surrendering one's own identity and assuming a new extraordinary identity."¹⁸ The covering of one face with another, I will argue, signifies the dead man's departure from his previous life and his attainment of a new and completely different identity through death.

¹⁸ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 103.

his attainment of a new and completely different identity through death. Other funerary trappings found on and with the Shaft Grave dead correspond to this idea of a transmuted existence. The females were wrapped in shrouds decorated all over with gold-foil ornaments. The dead children, on the other hand, were entirely covered with gold sheets (Fig.8).¹⁹ It is perhaps because complete coverage was more affordable in the case of children, given the relatively low amount of gold needed for their small size, keener sense of loss for death of a child, or that children required less variety of decorative designs. All these contribute to the creation of an illusion of the disappearance of the original, corporal body, or rather, the transformation of its substance from flesh to gold. Although the males wearing the gold masks did not enjoy as thorough coverage, the concentration of gold on the face may actually emphasize the synecdochic value of face and head for the whole of the individual; the gold breastplates that some of them wore²⁰ could also be serving the same end by recreating the chest/heart, one of the most vital and visible body parts of a man. A similar idea of the re-introduction of life may already have been operating behind the Early Bronze Age “diadems” from Mochlos, which, in my opinion, are more likely to be used as eye-coverings for the dead instead. One of those (Fig. 9-11) has two open eyes on it (which rather undermines their hypothetical use as “diadems” or headbands, since this would result in a strange image of a person with two sets of eyes), which strongly suggests the covering and replacement of the most distinguishing feature of death, the closed and lifeless eyes, with its living counterpart, thereby creating the simulation of a second life in the dead person’s face.

Furthermore, I will speculate that the new identity that the dead assumes may well have a divine nature. As Cavanagh remarks, the symbolism in the replacement of decayed flesh by incorruptible gold is difficult to miss.²¹ By exchanging an ephemeral face for a permanent, imperishable one, the dead casts off his mortality and assumes a status approaching the eternal and the divine. Theodossiev, in discussing some 7th-6th century gold and silver masks from Central Balkans, considered them as connecting to the postmortem deification of the aristocrats wearing them, and, citing Fol, interpreted the gold as “sacralizing” the head of the deceased. By exchanging an ephemeral face for a permanent, imperishable one, the dead casts off his mortality and assumes a

19 Schofield, *The Myceneans*, 46-47.

20 Schofield, *The Myceneans*, 43.

21 Cavanagh, “Innovation, Conservatism and Variation in Mycenaean Funerary Ritual,” 105.

status approaching the eternal and the divine. Theodossiev, in discussing some 7th-6th century gold and silver masks from Central Balkans, considered them as connecting to the postmortem deification of the aristocrats wearing them, and, citing Fol, interpreted the gold as “sacralizing” the head of the deceased.²² It is possible that similar ideas were at work behind the Mycenaean masks as well. Theodossiev also noted the solar symbolism of gold, which is a tempting association, but, in view of no observable predominance of solar imagery in Mycenaean culture, it may be more prudent to refrain from interpreting the Mycenaean gold masks as related to the representation of the heavenly symbols of the sun and sunlight. Heitz, in his 2008 article, made the interesting argument that the nobles buried in Grave Circle A appropriated the dress of Minoan high status individuals, as well as the heavily religious Minoan iconography, in order to accord to themselves similar religious authority enjoyed by their Minoan counterparts.²³ Although he admits that this theory cannot adequately explain the non-Minoan masks, I will suggest that the masks, in serving to evoke a transformation into the divine, may actually be homogeneous in purpose with other parts of the funerary assemblage that cultivate the idea of religious authority.

On the same note, while agreeing with Heitz on the point that masks as a custom cannot come from Minoan Crete, I nevertheless would like to bring up the possibility that this idea of divinizing the dead is an adoption of Minoan epiphany ritual by the mainland elite for their own purpose of evincing and emphasizing power. In a Minoan epiphany, the deity, who is most often a goddess, appears before the worshippers and is usually represented by a high priestess.²⁴ It is evidently an occasion in which the merging of the mortal and the divine occurs in the priestess who temporarily transforms herself into the deity. In this process the priestess and the goddess became indistinguishable, and indeed it is often difficult to tell one from the other in depiction of cult scenes, which suggests that the two were often treated as the same in the Minoan religious sphere.²⁵ Heitz also notices the same ambiguity in artistic depiction, and interpreted it as a result of actual indistinguishability between the elite and the gods in the hierocratic.

22 Theodossiev, “The Dead with Golden Faces: Dasaretian, Pelagonian, Mygdonian and Boeotian Funerary Masks,” 359-62.

23 Heitz, *Burying the Palaces? Ideologies in the Shaft Grave Period*, 22-26.

24 Lupack, “Minoan Religion”, 8.

25 e.g. Lupack, 9, note to Fig 19.2.

Minoan society,²⁶ which, in my opinion, can only be reinforced by the close control exercised by the elite over divine presence in epiphany rituals.

That the Mycenaeans knew and knowingly appropriated the idea of merging god and man from epiphany ritual is very probable. In discussing the gold rings found in the Argolid, Niemeier, considering the close contacts between mainland and Crete in the first half of the 15th century and the mainland manufacture of some of the rings, argues against the hypothesis that the Mycenaean owners did not understand the religious scenes on them.²⁷ He observed that among the four types of typical Minoan cult scenes, only two can be convincingly said to be adopted into mainland production: the procession scene and the “seated goddess” scene. Since ritual procession is common to all religions, the Minoan procession scene could be taken over as a generic sign for “procession,” therefore, the “seated goddess” scene is actually the only one adopted for its own expressive value. Since the other two scenes depict epiphany, Niemeier saw the selective adoption as showing that the Mycenaeans on the mainland did not import ecstatic epiphany as a ritual element.²⁸ I will argue that moreover this in fact demonstrates the Mycenaean transformation of the same ritual from divine-focused to human-focused, thereby endowing humans with divine status in the merging of human and divine. In the two epiphanic scenes, the goddess is either hovering in the air, therefore very distinctive from mortals, or only present in the form of signs, therefore not visible at all. Only in the “seated goddess” scene does one see the potential for blending the mortal and the divine, for, according to Hägg’s interpretation, the goddess here is present in corporal form, being acted out by a human being.²⁹

Therefore, the acceptance of only this scene and the rejection of the other two could have served as evidence that the Mycenaeans did not accept epiphany as a ritual practice but extracted from it the identification of human and god as an idea exploitable for its elevating potential. Even if one does not accept the reading of the masks as a mechanism for a divine transformation, one nevertheless must recognize its cogency as regard to the Mycenaean society at that period. As Voutsaki argued in her 1998 article, the early Mycenaean period witnessed the social and cultural instability on the mainland caused

26 Heitz, *Burying the Palaces? Ideologies in the Shaft Grave Period*, 19-20.

27 Niemeier, “Cult Scenes on Gold Rings from The Argolid,” 166.

28 Niemeier, “Cult Scenes on Gold Rings from The Argolid,” 165-70.

29 Hägg, “Die göttliche Epiphanie im minoischen Ritual,” 41-62, quoted in Niemeier, 167.

by increased influx of external goods such as from Crete, in response to which the mainlanders strive to redefine and emphasize their own cultural identity, and their primary means to achieve that was through mortuary practice. She pointed out that “the essence of elaboration in the mortuary sphere is the glorification of the ancestors who are an important ingredient of cultural identity”.³⁰ In the case of the masks, on a personal level, the elevation of deceased family members to divine or semi-divine status is a way to demonstrate one’s devotion to ancestors by rendering them proper respect, thereby creating close and amiable connection between the living and the dead; on a group level, the consciousness of their relatedness to the elevated individuals would serve to emphasize the collective identity of the whole community.

Naturally, one cannot ignore the social implications that the masks can bring as objects alone. Since gold is both precious and scarce (there being no gold source in the Argolid),³¹ by displaying objects made of gold, the person in charge of the funeral demonstrates his outstanding command over resources. Additionally, it is worth noting that one of the masks is made with an “exceptionally thick” sheet of gold,³² which implies, if anything, a relative abundance of the precious material. Moreover, the deposition of valuable objects into graves is a proof of one’s ability not only to afford such objects but also to destroy their value by taking them out of circulation, which helps their depositor “create” social status out of economic assets, making the funerary context a stage for “conspicuous consumption”.³³ The masks, most importantly, could also serve to honor the deceased by their economic value alone. As Voutsaki remarked, the deposition of prestigious items into the graves, and by doing so cancelling their utility and economic worth, is in itself a means to pay one’s respect to the dead.³⁴ Admittedly, the masks could work as emblems and examples of wealth without being used as a technique to elevate the dead on a supernatural level, but it is not impossible that they serve multiple purposes in being manufactured and placed in the mortuary context.

At the end of this paper, I wish to touch briefly on the subject of the

30 Voutsaki, “Mortuary Evidence, Symbolic Meanings and Social Change: A Comparison between Messenia and the Argolid in the Mycenaean Period”, 44-48.

31 Rutter, “Lesson 16: The Shaft Graves”.

32 Schofield, *The Mycenaens*, 40.

33 Voutsaki, “Mortuary Display, Prestige and Identity in the Shaft Grave Era,” 109.

Voutsaki, “Social and Political Processes in the Mycenaean Argolid: The Evidence from the Mortuary Practices”, 55-66, quoted in Mee, “Death and Burial,” 11.

34 Voutsaki, “Mortuary Display, Prestige and Identity in the Shaft Grave Era,” 112.

origin of the masks, namely, where did the Mycenaeans learn the idea of making these masks. First of all they may well be local inventions, since funerary masks of gold or other materials appear independently in unrelated civilizations, making them a general phenomenon rather than originating exclusively from one or a few specific cultures.³⁵ According to Despini, if one must seek external origin for the Mycenaean masks, “that region can only be Egypt,” seeing that it was “*il paese ‘classico’*”³⁶ for the masks. She saw the direct importation of this idea from Egypt as improbable, but considered the theory reasonable that the transmission of indirect information about such a custom in Egypt through Crete or Cyclades inspired the creation of the Mycenaean masks. I agree with her on the point of indirect inspiration, and wish to propose another possible origin for such knowledge: Crete. In her article, Despini called attention to the fact that the hypothesis of Cretan origin for the masks was long rejected on the basis that no gold mask was found on the island except for the apparently unrelated instance from Mouliana. But I will argue that firstly, the Cretan masks may not be of the same material, secondly, they may not be used in the same funerary context. In short, I propose that masks used in ritual performance on Crete may have been the precursors of the Mycenaean gold masks. Cavanagh already suggested that masks made of perishable materials (such as wood) may have been used in Bronze Age rituals and gave several examples from later religious practices from the Classical period,³⁷ the most significant one of which is the cult of Dionysos. In this cult, as Theodossiev expounds in his 1998 article, “the mask of the god[...]represented the deity in the moment of epiphaneia. Simultaneously, the masked participants in Dionysiac rituals also represented the gods and even became Dionysos’ personifications”.³⁸ This description immediately calls in mind the Minoan epiphany ritual in which a priestess personifies the goddess. As discussed above, the masks are particularly suitable for the assumption of a “new extraordinary identity” which is often, as the Dionysiac cult shows, “extraordinary” in the sense of the divine and supernatural. Could it be possible that the Minoans also use masks in their summoning and embodying of the goddess?

35 Despini, “Gold funerary masks,” 27-28.

36 Krien-Kummrow, “Machera”, 900-18, quoted in Despini, 28.

37 Cavanagh, “Innovation, Conservatism and Variation in Mycenaean Funerary Ritual,” 105.

38 Theodossiev, “The Dead with Golden Faces: Dasaretian, Pelagonian, Mygdonian and Boeotian Funeral Masks”, 360.

It may be worth noting that traces of an ecstatic, possibly anthropogagic, cult very similar to that of Dionysos have been found on Crete, dating to around 1450 BC.³⁹ Moreover, the transformation of ritual masks into funerary masks harmonizes well with the typical Mycenaean pattern of appropriating Minoan religious miscellany into funerary sphere: objects normally deposited in Minoan sanctuaries became grave offerings,⁴⁰ and Koehl observed that rhyta, which appears largely in cultic contexts on Crete, were found mostly in graves instead of shrines on the mainland.⁴¹ If the Mycenaean, as proposed above, indeed learned the idea of a divine transformation from the Minoan epiphany ritual, it is reasonable that they would have borrowed some of the actual practices of that ritual as well. In any case, since it is possible that none of the masks used, as remarked above, survive into archaeological records, and no contemporary text could help reveal the actual cult practice on Minoan Crete, all these must remain pure speculation. Nevertheless it may be useful to point out that the absence of gold funerary masks does not necessarily denote a lack of connection to the Mycenaean masks in a particular region.

To conclude, the Mycenaean gold masks from Grave Circle A were not portraits in any sense. Their true purpose may include funerary “cosmetic” and the endowment of a second, possibly divine life to the dead, an idea which the Mycenaean could learn from the Cretan epiphany ritual. The origin of the masks could be local or Egyptian, but a Cretan hypothesis should not be refused on the ground that no funerary masks appear on that island. In the author’s opinion, a number of points treated in this paper, especially the possible use of ritual masks on Minoan Crete, deserve further research, and it is to be hoped that new findings could shed light on the still unexplained mystery of the Mycenaean gold masks.

39 Warren, “Minoan Crete and ecstatic religion. Preliminary observation on the 1979 excavations at Knossos + Postscript on the 1980 excavations at Knossos”, 155-166.

40 Voutsaki, “Mortuary Evidence, Symbolic Meanings and Social Change,” 47.

41 Koehl, “The functions of Aegean Bronze Age rhyta”, 187.

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Fig. 1. (upper right) Gold masks from Grave Circle A at Mycenae, the “flat” masks in the middle row. (After Schofield 2007, Fig.18.)

Fig. 2. (upper left) Electrum mask from Grave Circle B at Mycenae. (After Schofield 2007, Fig.14.)

Fig. 3. (lower right) Relief face on an Early Bronze Age pithos from Kea, dated third millennium B.C. (After Vermeule 1991, Fig. 29.)



Fig. 4-6. An Aegean human head rhyton, dated probably 13th century B.C. (After Vermeule 1991, Fig. 23., Fig. 26., cover page)



Fig. 7. (right) Funerary scene on a clay larnax from the cemetery at Tanagra. (After Cavanagh and Mee 1998, Fig. 8.2.)

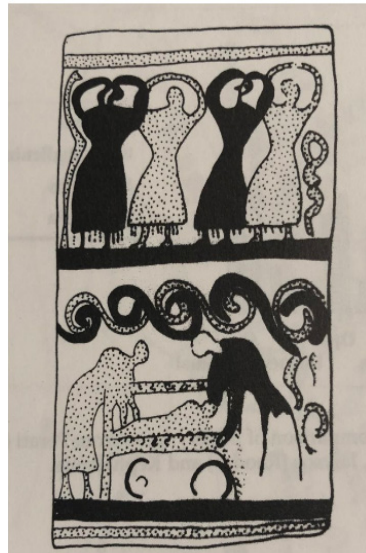




Fig. 8. (left) Whole-body coverings made from gold sheets for an infant buried at Grave Circle A at Mycenae. (After Schofield 2007, Fig. 24.)

Fig. 9-10. Early Bronze Age “diadem” from Mochlos with eye decoration. (After Hickman 2008, Plate 12: A. B.)

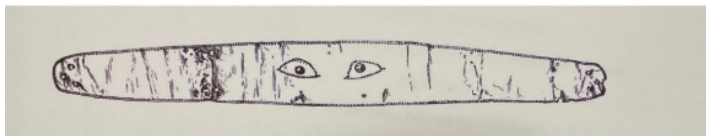


Fig. 11. Detail of the eye decoration. (After Hickman 2008, Plate 12: C.)



Women in Aristophanes: Politically Capable or a Political Critique?

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of the transgressive portrayals of women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, *Ecclesiazusae*, and *Thesmophoriazusae*, seeking to answer whether they serve mainly to advocate a more politically empowered view of women or to criticize the Athenian *polis*. The paper is organized into two sections: one exploring an interpretation of these texts as being fundamentally about women as politically capable people, and the other refuting this, focusing instead on the underlying critique of the polar city structure. In the former, I engage mainly in textual analysis, arguing that the characterizations of women in these plays largely support the argument that women have the same innate capacity for political action as men. I also look to other artistic mediums that may indicate a cultural trend of female empowerment in Athens during the fourth and fifth centuries BCE. However, in the second section, I explain why this is not in fact the goal of these portrayals, engaging in existing academic discourse regarding Athenian drama to elucidate the function of gender relations in the context of dramatic festivals. Here, I focus on the broader Aristophanic theme of reconciliation, particularly as it pertains to the interplay between the political sphere (*polis*) and the domestic one (*oikos*).¹

¹ I am incredibly grateful to Michael Bales and to Sean Corner for helping me develop these arguments in their early stages, and for sourcing aid. I would also like to thank Jonathan Hall for expanding my knowledge of Aristophanes overall, and for teaching me a significant portion of the historical background presented in this paper.

Introduction

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (hereafter *Lys.*), *Ecclesiazusae* (hereafter *Eccl.*), and *Thesmophoriazusae* (hereafter *Thesmo.*) are three comedies written in the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE. Women play the central characters in these works, acting democratically in all of them, and are even portrayed as political actors in the first two. The interpretation of these depictions of women initially presented in this paper is that Aristophanes uses them to argue that women have the same innate capacity for political involvement as men. However, a closer inspection of the plays' theatrical and historical context makes it clear that the division of the sexes is used to emphasize the division between the *polis* and the *oikos*, advocating for harmony between the two city spheres and criticizing the political one in the process.

An exploration of the first conjecture consists of many references to the texts themselves, as Aristophanes depicts the women coordinating successful coups, holding meetings like politicians, and completely taking over the running of the state. He contrasts these representations of women as effective political actors with portrayals of incredibly incompetent men, seemingly questioning the reason for the exclusion of women from the political sphere. The derogatory, superficial feminization of these male characters, as well as the more positive portrayal of authentic femininity as a tool that enables the women to effect change, serve to show that both men and women are inherently capable of "doing politics," but also to argue that the preservation of real feminine roles is precisely what allows the women to develop and exercise better political capabilities. Straying somewhat from Aristophanes' scripts, I then look at a broader range of sources, including tragedy, pottery, and even philosophy (Plato's *Republic* specifically) to explore the possibility that an overarching cultural shift regarding attitudes toward women was taking place around this time. Pomeroy states that while there is "general agreement that politically and legally the condition of women in Classical Athens was one of inferiority, the question of her social status has generated a major controversy," so I situate Aristophanes' comedies in this broader cultural climate, proposing that it allowed for a more positive portrayal of women—specifically, one that endorses women's political empowerment.²

The second approach regarding the analysis of Aristophanes' depictions of women argues that their role is not, in fact, to empower them,

2 Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 58.

but rather to highlight certain issues in the political sphere, critiquing its management in the process. Blundell argues that gender relations were commonly used as a means of exploring other divisions in Athenian drama,³ and Ober proposes that the inversion of supposed natural facts is used in these works to explore the validity of “social facts.”⁴ This entails a questioning of the structure of the *polis*, and consequently in part its separation from the *oikos*. *Lys.* and *Thesm.* were also both written in an especially unstable political climate, both between Athens and Sparta and within the city-state itself. Aristophanes thus has women infiltrate the political sphere to demonstrate the importance of the interplay between the *oikos* and *polis*, advocating for harmony between the two as a means of giving Athens some internal strength. Given that the spheres’ relationship is dictated by those who do have political power, this second interpretation of the portrayals of women in Aristophanes’ female-centric plays argues that, by underscoring the interconnectedness of the *oikos* and *polis*, they serve to critique the contemporary management of the latter.

Examining the texts in light of the historical and cultural contexts that shaped them, this paper evaluates the role of the portrayals of women in *Lys.*, *Eccl.*, and *Thesm.* Aristophanes presents many of the women in these plays as capable political actors, juxtaposing them with politically inept, and even *polis*-damaging male characters. However, this paper ultimately concludes that this is not indicative of an attempt to advocate a more empowered view of women. Instead, these inverted gender relations—emerging under the Athenian dramatic framework—serve to highlight the polar nature of contemporary Athens’ city structure, condemning the state and management of the Athenian *polis*, and advocating for internal harmony between the political and domestic spheres.

Endorsement of Women’s Political Empowerment

The first interpretation of Aristophanes’ portrayals of women in *Lys.*, *Eccl.*, and *Thesm.* is that they serve to show that women have the same political capabilities as men. While the comic playwright was not advocating that the Athenian *polis* be wholly turned over to women, the female characters of these plays do act democratically, and, in two cases, are directly involved in the city’s political management. The

³ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 173.

⁴ Ober, *Political Dissent*, 134.

women of *Thesmo.* organize their meetings in the same fashion as the men of the Assembly: there is a daily agenda, each woman is able to speak without interruption, and minutes are even taken to record the decisions of the day. *Lys.* assumes more direct involvement in the *polis*, as the title-character devises two separate schemes to stop the Peloponnesian War. Her first plan involves the coordination of the younger women's sex strike, but her organization of the older female semi-chorus is even more overtly political, as she institutes a military coup and bars the old men from accessing the Acropolis. *Eccl.* involves the most prominent political prowess on the part of the women: Praxagora and the other women of Athens infiltrate the Assembly and convince the male citizenry to allow "the women [to] take over the reins of the City," making them the sole political actors.⁵ We see, then, that these plays evince a capacity for female leadership that is not confined to the home, presenting women as being just as capable of political action as men.

The political competence on the part of the women is accentuated by the incredibly incompetent portrayals of men, especially in the running of the state. Earlier in his career, Aristophanes made a point to sympathize with the past, indulging in nostalgia for the "good ol' days." This is especially apparent at the end of *Knights*, when the Sausage-seller rejuvenates Demos, returning him to the state he was in "when in the days of yore he had Aristeides and Miltiades for his messmates,"⁶ and thus becomes the "restorer of the glories of the Persian War period."⁷ However, by 411 BCE, when both *Lys.* and *Thesmo.* are performed, this is no longer the case. *Lys.* represents a "distant happy past in which Athens and Sparta stood side by side, the time of the Persian Wars," and yet the male chorus' references to the wars are presented as unequivocally outdated.⁸ They declare, "may my trophy no longer stand in the Four Towns," referencing a trophy commemorating the victory at the battle of Marathon, which took place in 490 BCE.⁹ That is almost eighty years prior to this play's performance, meaning that there would be almost no one left alive by this point who had actu-

5 Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae*, line 466.

6 Aristophanes, *Knights*, line 1325. Sommerstein explains that Aristeides was nicknamed "the Just" and that Miltiades was the victor of Marathon. (Sommerstein, notes to *Knights*, 215)

7 Sommerstein, introduction to *Knights*, 2-3.

8 Newiger, "War and Peace," 158.

9 Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, line 285.

ally fought at Marathon, giving the audience the impression that the male semichorus is incredibly out of touch with contemporary Athens, and by extension with the political issues that actually plague the city. The younger men of the play do not have this same issue regarding temporal awareness, but still they are depicted as being inept, as displayed by the Proboulos' incredulous and ignorant question, "Do you say it's because of the money that we're at war?"¹⁰ Lysistrata expands on the male mismanagement of the city's funds, responding:

Lysistrata: Yes, and that's why there was all the other agitation. It was in order that Peisander, and all those who were eager to hold office, might have something there to steal, that they were always stirring up some brouhaha or other. Well, if that's their aim let them do what they will: they've no more chance now of getting hold of the money here. (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 489-91)

And so the men of the play exemplify ineptitude in a number of ways: both through their complete unawareness of the issues that actually pose a threat to Athens, as well as through the active exacerbation of the issues they somehow fail to recognize.

The men of *Eccl.* are presented as being even more useless: Blepyrus and his neighbor both miss the ecclesia completely, and later hear through Chremes that it was "so funny, the way they were showering that vermillion dye at people in all directions."¹¹ This clearly refers to the contemporary custom of having Scythian slaves walk through the Agora with a red-dyed rope, staining any citizens who do not make it to the Assembly on time. And so, Chremes' remark attests to the sheer multitude of late-comers, this mass tardiness highlighting the lack of civic duty felt by the men of the play. Moreover, any guilt the men feel about being late is not due to having missed out on democratic involvement; it's about the missed stipend! In the 390s, Athenian men who attended Assembly meetings and arrived on time began to be paid a few obols to do so, and it is precisely this lost money that Chremes laments. Blepyrus rightly points this out to him, declaring, "Ashamed to face who? Your shopping-bag, that's all!"¹² The men do not even seem particularly upset about the stripping of their civic rights, viewing this as liberation from responsibility, more than anything:

¹⁰ Aristophanes, line 488.

¹¹ Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae*, lines 388-9.

¹² Aristophanes, line 383.

Blepyrus: So I don't have the bother any more, either, of getting up groaning at first light?

Chremes: No, indeed, that's the women's concern now; you can stay farting at home, groan-free. (Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae*, 462-4)

And so, the displays of aptitude on the part of the women in these plays—as contrasted with the particularly damning portrayals of men—raise the question: why are men in the political sphere, but women are not allowed to be?

These polar depictions of men and women take place on multiple fronts: both on a superficial level and on an institutional one. Blundell asserts that a “female takeover of masculine prerogative and masculine space” is apposed with a “temporary [physical] feminisation of a male character,” a phenomenon that takes place in every single one of the plays treated in this paper.¹³ It is important to stress that this feminisation is an artificial one, wherein the men undergo an aesthetic transformation as a means of embarrassment: the Proboulos of *Lys.* is dressed in a veil, given a work-basket, told to start carding wool,¹⁴ and adorned with a garland of flowers, ribbons, and a tiara;¹⁵ in *Thesmo.*, Mnesilochus' beard is shaved, his body hair singed, and he is dressed in women's clothes;¹⁶ in *Eccl.*, since Praxagora has taken her husband's shoes and cloak for her disguise, Blepyrus comes out of the house wearing his wife's saffron robe and Persian slippers.¹⁷ But the more significant reversal comes not from a change in characters' appearance, but from the “transfer of part of the *oikos* structure into the *polis*.”¹⁸ In *Lys.*, the men are the ones who originally “wouldn't let [the women] utter a sound,”¹⁹ but later, Lysistrata tells the Proboulos to be quiet when he disregards her criticisms, “revers[ing] an inset domestic scene”²⁰ in the context of a political debate. In *Thesmo.*, the women discuss how to exact revenge upon Euripides for his slanderous portrayals of them, the act of administering justice being a very political affair. The women of *Eccl.* go the farthest by far, instituting a gynocracy and thus completely taking over the previously all-male *polis*. And so, the male characters

13 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 175.

14 Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, lines 529-39.

15 Aristophanes, lines 601-4.

16 Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, lines 216-65.

17 Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae*, lines 314-9.

18 Hutchinson, “House Politics and City Politics,” 57.

19 Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, line 509.

20 Hutchinson, “House Politics and City Politics,” 57.

undergo a caricatured feminisation, which results in their being treated with the same disrespect that women of the period were subject to. This, in turn, is juxtaposed with the actual, politically capable femininity displayed by the women of the plays. With this blending of masculine and feminine as well as of *oikos* and *polis*, the supposed differences between men and women become far more nebulous, further raising questions regarding women's agency and its predominant confinement to the *oikos*.

This conflation of masculinity and femininity is also explored in the inverse, but to a much lesser degree; in both *Themso.* and *Lys.*, the women who at first glance seem to be behaving or effecting change in a manner similar to men actually do so while acting in accordance with women's roles in Athenian civic and social life. The female "intrusion [...] into the public arena" that takes place in *Thesmo.* is incredibly minimal, and not just because this is the only one of Aristophanes' three female-centric plays in which the women are not concerned with legislative change.²¹ In real life, the Thesmophoria "involved a female incursion into the Pnyx, an area normally devoted to the political decision-making of men."²² Aristophanes attests to this in l.658 of *Thesmo.*, mentioning the Pnyx by name and thus setting the stage for female action in a political space that takes place without the women having to assume "masculine modes of behaviour."²³ The political aptitude of women when they act as, well, women, is also represented in *Lys.*, both more profoundly and a little more subtly. The members of the older, female semichorus of the play contribute to Lysistrata's plan by seizing the Acropolis and restricting men's access to the city's funds, the guarding of the city's money being a "purely Athenian" (i.e., traditionally masculine) action.²⁴ They even come running out of the Acropolis wearing armor, their militaristic attire reinforcing this interpretation. It would be a mistake, however, to construe these actions as being chiefly masculine, for while the older women's operation may not seem pointedly feminine when compared to the younger women's sex strike, they still act mainly in line with their social position as women—it is just the social position of *aged* women. Older Athenian women were more similar to men in a certain sense, the passing of menopause resulting in their "diminished value in men's eyes" and consequently allowing them to enjoy "greater freedom of movement" than their younger counter-

21 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 173.

22 Blundell, 176.

23 Blundell, 173.

24 Sommerstein, introduction to *Lysistrata*, 4.

parts.²⁵ Hyperides attests to this, saying:

Δεῖ τὴν ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας ἐκπορευομένην ἐν τοιαύτῃ καταστάσει εἶναι τῆς ἡλικίας, ὥστε τοὺς ἀπαντῶντας πυνθάνεσθαι, μὴ τίνος ἐστὶ γυνή, ἀλλὰ τίνος μήτηρ.²⁶



Fig. 1. Bell-krater with Alcmena seated on an altar, appealing to Zeus against Amphitryon. Signed by Python as painter. Paestan, Classical, red-figure, ca. 360-320 BCE. (Catalogue of Vases in the British Museum [F149])

Following these social attitudes, in contrast to the younger women's weaponization of their sexual allure, the older women contribute to Lysistrata's plan by using the partial freedom they are granted by virtue of their age, which—although by no equal to that of men—does make them more socially akin to men than younger women in Athenian society, while remaining largely within the purview of womanhood. Moreover, upon their entrance, the older women appear as “typical Athenian housewives,” as they come onto the stage carrying *hydriai*—water jugs—and are consequently introduced while performing a “classic type of female work.”²⁷ In fact, it is while carrying these water jugs that they are able to save both the younger women and the Acropolis itself, dousing the old men who are attempting to burn the besieged women and thus paralleling “tragic scenes in which helpless women and children, standing or sitting at an altar as suppliants, are threatened with immolation by the evil powers-that-be,” as seen at the beginning of Euripides' *Heracles* and *Andromache*, as well as in his lost *Alcmena* (see Fig. 1).²⁸ So Aristophanes takes “special care to invest the older women with an unusual kind of authority,” a kind of “female heroism” that “stems from their repeated association with the day-to-day household economy and with important civic rituals and cults, on which the salvation of the city depends.”²⁹ The playwright has the older

25 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 149.

26 “If a woman goes out of her house she should have reached a time of life when those who meet her will ask not whose wife she is but whose mother.” (Hyperides, frag. 205 Burt)

27 Faraone, “Priestess and Courtesan,” 211, 208.

28 Faraone, “Salvation and Female Heroics,” 40.

29 Faraone, “Priestess and Courtesan,” 208.

women admit this themselves, as the semichorus advises the audience in l.638–48, rattling off experience fulfilling important religious duties such as being *arrephoros*, serving as a corn-grinder, being a ‘bear’ at the Brauronia, and being a basket-bearer as sources of authority.³⁰ So, through their dousing of the fire—which saves not only the women, but the Acropolis, too—and through their engagement with Athenian religious festivals, the old women in *Lys.* display an incredible amount of civic involvement and an ability to serve as saviors of the city that stems precisely from the preservation of their roles as women.

A similar perceived masculinity is exhibited by the character of Lysistrata herself, for her assertiveness and her propensity for leadership can be construed as masculine traits (they are even referred to as such directly within the text). But, Faraone explains that this is in fact due to her representing a duality of female archetypes: the priestess and the courtesan. Lysistrata is almost certainly based on a contemporary aristocratic priestess: Lysimache, who was the priestess of Athena Polias. The cult of Athena Polias was actually located on the Acropolis, which is the very same spot where the women of *Lys.* spend most of their time in the play, and the script contains many allusions to the Panatheneia—“a festival of crucial importance to the safety and solidarity of the city.”³¹ Lysistrata seems even at times to “mirror the military spirit, the sound judgement, and the domestic accomplishments of the virgin goddess herself”³²—a comparison that Foley also makes,³³ and that draws further attention to Lysistrata’s ability to protect Athens through her quasi-priestess-hood. But there are also moments in the play where Lysistrata “seems far from a pious priestess of the virgin Athena,” coming across instead as a “clever and conniving courtesan.”³⁴ Notably, in her “famous speech to the Proboulois about carding and weaving the Athenian civic body,” Lysistrata calls upon Eros and Aphrodite instead of on “Athena in her role as patron of women’s handicrafts”:³⁵

Lysistrata: Well, so long as sweet-souled Eros and Cyprus-born Aphrodite breathe desire over our bosoms and our thighs, and so

30 Faraone, 212.

31 Faraone, 215.

32 Faraone, 215.

33 “Lysistrata becomes almost an incarnation of her patron deity” (Foley, 9).

34 Faraone, “Priestess and Courtesan,” 215.

35 Faraone, 215.

engender in our menfolk a delightful rigidity and attacks of truncheonism, I believe that one day we will be known among the Greeks as the Dissolvers of Strife. (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 551-4)

But these two forms of feminine portrayal go hand-in-hand in the case of *Lysistrata*: the word Sommerstein translates as “Dissolvers of Strife” is actually *Λυσιμάχας*—the plural of *Lysimache*!³⁶ Moreover, while Sommerstein translates l. 1108–11 of *Lys.* as “Hail, bravest of all women! Now [...] the leaders of the Greeks, captivated by your magic, have come together and jointly submitted all their disputes to your arbitration,” Faraone includes the following translation in his article: “Hail, O most manly (*andreiotatê*) of all women! Now [...] the most powerful of the Greeks have been seized by your iunx spell and have come to you en masse.”³⁷ Faraone claims that this epithet, “most manly,” is interpreted figuratively for the most part, and is considered “the crowning moment to a series of allusions and references that connect *Lysistrata* with the masculine war goddess Athena.”³⁸ To clarify how Faraone is using the term “masculine”: the associations between military prowess and masculinity are strong, but this does not rob the dichotomy that *Lysistrata* exemplifies of its predominantly, if not exclusively, feminine quality. Athena is a virgin goddess, after all, so while her status as a war deity is not standard for a goddess, in *Lysistrata*, these qualities are pointedly calling to mind Athena and the cult of Athena Polias, rather than men and the military in general. As for the second half of the quotation: Faraone maintains that a iunx is an “erotic magic spell” used primarily by men as a means of luring women away from their fathers or husbands, but that it is also used by courtesans, to seduce married men.³⁹ And so, he proposes that when *Lysistrata* is described as “most manly,” on top of the allusions to Athena, this is also referencing the way that she has “co-opted [...] a traditionally male weapon of erotic magic” in her role as a madam.⁴⁰ And so, the comedy’s conclusion consolidates these two aspects of *Lysistrata*’s character—Aristophanes gives the protagonist “a consistently intelligent character, endowed with the various rhetorical and strategic skills necessary for good lead-

36 Incidentally, “*Lysimache*” and “*Lysistrata*” are actually synonymous, for the prefix *λύσις* = “releasing” and is the same in both names, and the root of *Lysimache* is *μάχη* = “battle” or “combat,” while the root of *Lysistrata* is *στρατός* = “army.”

37 Faraone, “Priestess and Courtesan,” 217.

38 Faraone, 217.

39 Faraone, 217.

40 Faraone, 219.

ership,” and he does so by having her embody the characteristics of the “two kinds of *women* [italics mine] who could in fact assume roles of real leadership in their communities: the wealthy courtesan and the aristocratic priestess.”⁴¹

An analysis of the body of these scripts thus allows for the interpretation that the depictions of women in *Lys.*, *Eccl.*, and *Thesm.* endorse a view that women have a natural capacity for political involvement that is not unlike that of men—in fact, it may even be superior to theirs. But was the cultural climate of 4th- and 5th-century Athens such that Aristophanes could have plausibly been making arguments that advocate a more empowered view of women? Well, yes! In theatre, especially tragedy, there are numerous examples of decisive and self-assured female characters who are also presented in a rather sympathetic light, so this is not particularly innovative on Aristophanes’ part. In Sophocles’ *Antigone*, for example, the title-character overtly disobeys Creon’s orders, and yet she is the story’s victim. In the first half of the play, the chorus affirms the importance of honouring the “laws of the land and the justice of the gods,” and yet Creon dictates and thus honors the former, whereas Antigone stubbornly honors the latter, creating a dichotomy of justice in the text.⁴² But by the end, the chorus sides with Antigone—it cries for her as she is taken to her tomb, and she is compared to other pitiable characters from history and mythology. She is even likened to a god on multiple occasions! But by the end, the chorus sides with Antigone—it cries for her as she is taken to her tomb,⁴³ and she is compared to other pitiable characters from history and mythology.⁴⁴ She is even likened to a god on multiple occasions!⁴⁵ This quasi-deification, as well as the great misery that befalls Creon as a result of his damning of Antigone, make a martyr out of her, and so it would seem that Sophocles ends up almost condoning a woman’s civic disobedience; he certainly doesn’t condemn it. Similarly, Euripides’ Medea is portrayed as remarkably sympathetic, which is especially surprising given that she goes on to murder her own children. Jason’s cruel abandonment leads to her despairing declaration, “Surely, of all creatures that have life and will, we women/ Are the most wretched.”⁴⁶

41 Faraone, 222.

42 Sophocles, *Antigone*, lines 370, 369.

43 Sophocles, line 803.

44 Sophocles, lines 944-87.

45 Antigone’s act of burying her brother is described as “the work of gods” (Sophocles, line 279), and her life and death are both referred to as “godlike” (Sophocles, line 837).

46 Euripides, *Medea*, lines 230-1.

She then lists the various plights of women, citing that they are “forced to accept as masters of their bodies men whose characters are totally unknown to them,” that divorce is viewed shamefully and is thus not actually a pursuable option, and that a man who is “tired of his home can find diversions elsewhere, but a wife is compelled to look to one man alone.”⁴⁷ Medea, like other female characters of Euripides, “conform[s] to the ideological stereotype of the dangerous and excessive female,” but is simultaneously portrayed as somewhat “justified in her actions,” despite their being so unspeakable.⁴⁸

These more positive attitudes toward women are not limited to the theatre, though; there are also indications of an overarching cultural shift taking place in this regard. In the fifth century BCE, female monsters started to be “rethought, rationalized, and humanized, ... [and] female hybrids [became] more beautiful in appearance.”⁴⁹ One clear example of this is the concept of “The Beautiful Medusa,” as the gorgon was “progressively transformed into an attractive young woman” and started to be represented as more of a “tragic figure” than as an aggressor.⁵⁰ She is referred to as the “beautiful-cheeked Medusa” in poetry from the early fifth century,⁵¹ and is depicted as a sleeping maiden in pottery from the middle of the century.



Fig 2. Stand with Gorgoneion. Signed by Ergotimos as potter and Kleitias as painter. Greek (Attic), Archaic, black-figure, ca. 570 BCE. (Kagalou, *Dangerous Beauty*, 8)



Fig 3. Pelike (jar) with Perseus beheading the sleeping Medusa. Attributed to Polygnotos, Greek (Attic), Classical red-figure, ca. 450-440 BCE. (*Ibid* 11)

47 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 177.

48 Blundell, 177.

49 Karoglou, “Dangerous Beauty,” 5.

50 Karoglou, 9.

51 Pindar, *Pythian Ode*, 12.16

While the humanization of female monsters (note the difference between Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) is further support for the argument that fictional women—particularly those taken from mythology—started to be regarded in a more positive light, there is also evidence that *real* women were starting to be viewed somewhat more similarly to men. During this period, “rapid political and social change had generated an intellectual atmosphere [in Athens] in which thinkers were challenging assumptions about the natural basis for conventional divisions within society,” the division of the sexes being among them.⁵² In the late fifth century, Sophists were broadly “arguing that values and institutions which were assumed to be grounded in ‘nature’ were in reality social constructs,” but once we get to Plato, the division of the sexes begins to be explored outright.⁵³ In the organization of his utopian city, only very specific individuals can become Guardians—his perfectly just philosopher-kings. But gender poses no barrier in this regard. In his *Republic*, Plato’s Socrates argues that women, like men, have natural aptitudes for medicine, for music, for gymnastics, and also for wisdom or spiritedness; and so, just as is the case with men, there is “one woman fit for guarding and another not.”⁵⁴ “Men and women,” he asserts, “have the same nature with respect to guarding a city,” aside from women being, on average, physically weaker.⁵⁵ He does, of course, also note the reproductive difference between males and females, but affirms that this has no bearing on one’s ability to act as a Guardian. He states this explicitly when he describes the process of acquiring knowledge of the Good, which serves as a prerequisite for being able to properly rule the city. Glaucon tells him, “Just like a sculptor, Socrates, [...] you have produced ruling men who are wholly fair,” to which the philosopher responds, “And ruling women, too, Glaucon. [...] Don’t suppose that what I have said applies any more to men than to women, all those who are born among them with adequate natures.”⁵⁶ Plato thus completely shuns the division of the sexes in his *Republic*, his vision of a successful, perfectly just city that is run partly by women evidencing a cultural shift toward a comparatively progressive view of women’s position in society.

The *Republic* is assumed to have been written about a decade after *Eccl.*, but the two works are remarkably similar, and not just in their

52 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 173.

53 Blundell, 181.

54 Plato, *Republic*, 455e–456a.

55 Plato, 456a.

56 Plato, 540c.

ideas regarding women as political authorities. Sommerstein is quite thorough in his listing of the similarities between the running of Plato's just city (as pertains to the Guardians) and that of Praxagora's proposed society, noting eleven points of striking comparison. The following is a condensed list: there is to be virtually no private property (*Rep.* 416d,

(1) οὐκ ἔσται ὅσον ἑσάν λόγων ἐπεγέρετε· ὃν ἐγὼ ὄρων παρῆκα τότε, μὴ παρασχοῖ παλιν ὄχλον 450 B.

(2) ἀπιστοῦντα δὲ καὶ ζητοῦντα ἅμα τοὺς λόγους ποιῆσθαι, ὃ δὴ ἐγὼ δρῶ, φοβερὸν τε καὶ σφαλερὸν, οὗ τι γέλωτα ὀφλεῖν κτλ. 450 E.

(3) τάχα δὲ οὕτως ἂν ἠρόθως ἔχει, μετὰ ἀνδρείων δρᾶμα πατηλῶς διακραθῆν τὸ γυναικείον αὐ κεραίνειν 451 B C.

(4) οὐ φοβηθῆναι τὰ τῶν χρηρίετων σκώμματα, ἕσα καὶ οἷα ἂν εἴποιεν εἰς τὴν τοιαύτην μεταβολὴν γενομένην καὶ περὶ τὰ γυμνάσια καὶ περὶ μουσικῆν καὶ οὐκ ἐλαχίστα περὶ τὴν τῶν ὄπλων σχίσιν καὶ ἔκτων ὀχρέως 452 B C.

(5) μάταιος ὅς γελοιὸν ἄλλο τι ἤγάται ἢ τὸ κακόν, καὶ ὁ γελοιοποιεῖν ἐπιχειρῶν πρὸς ἄλλον τινα ὄφιν ἀνοβλέπων ὡς γελοιὸν ἢ τὴν τοῦ ἀφροσύης τε καὶ κακοῦ, καὶ καλοῦ αἰ σπουδαίει πρὸς ἄλλον τινα σκοπὸν στρεφόμενος ἢ τὸν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ 452 D. Cf. also δευθίσι τε τοῖσιν μὴ τὰ αἰτίων κρᾶττεν, ἀλλὰ σπουδαίειν 452 C.

(6) τὸν τὰ ἐναντία λέγοντα 454 E and τοῦ τὰ τοιαῦτα ἀντιλέγοντος 455 A.

(7) ὃ δὲ γελῶν ἀπὸ ἐπὶ γυμνασίᾳ γυναιξίν, τοῦ βελγίστου ἕνεκα γυμναζομένου, ἀπέλη τοῦ γελοίου [σοφίας] ὄρετον καρπὸν, οὐδὲν οἶδεν, ὡς εἴποιεν, ἐφ' ᾧ γέλετ' οὐδ' ὅτι κρᾶττεν 457 B.

(8) καὶ μὲν δὴ καὶ τοῖς πρόσθεν γε ἠμολογῶμεν 464 B.

(9) ὦ Σώκратες—τοιοῦτον ἐμβέβηκας ῥήμα τε καὶ λόγον, ὃν εἰπὼν ἦγού' ἐπὶ οὐ πᾶν πολλοῖς τε καὶ οὐ φαύλους—θεῖν διατεταμένους ὡς θαυμασία ἔργασομένους 473 E f.

Fig. 4. List of potential references to Aristophanes in Plato's Republic. (Adam, Appendices to Book V of Republic, 349)

are (*Rep.* 457d, 461d–e, cf. *Eccl.* 1. 635–7).⁵⁷ The works are far too similar for there to be no historical connection between the texts, and so it is worth exploring the three main hypotheses regarding their relationship: that Aristophanes is making a mockery of Plato's model, that Plato was inspired by Aristophanes, or that both works were inspired by a common source. The first theory is ruled out by likely chronology, as well as by the purpose of Aristophanes' comedies, as the "accurate and complete recapitulation of Plato's theories would not only be slavish and pedantic, but also much less amusing than a partial or distorted view." Aristotle also declares Plato to have been the first authority to propose this kind of political model, ruling out the third conjecture. In support of the remaining proposition, Adam notes nine instances in which Plato even seems to be referring to Aristophanes (see Fig. 4), and Sommerstein includes the most notable ones:

Perhaps [...] compared to what is habitual, many of the things now being said would look ridiculous if they were to be done as is said ... Well [...] since we've started to speak, we mustn't be afraid of all the jokes--of whatever kind--the wits might make if such a change took place ... not so long ago [...] it seemed shameful and

57 Sommerstein, introduction to *Ecclesiazusae*, 14; Adam, Appendices to Book V of Republic, 350–1.

and ridiculous to the Greeks--as it does now to the many among the barbarians--to see men naked; and that when the Cretans originated the gymnasiums, and then the Lacedaemonians, it was possible for the urbane of the time to make a comedy of that. (Plato, *Republic*, 452a-d)

[H]e is empty who believes anything is ridiculous other than the bad, and who tries to produce laughter looking to any sight as ridiculous other than the sight of the foolish and the bad. (Ibid., 452d)

Sommerstein argues, “these remarks would be particularly pointed if Plato were at that moment doing the reverse of what he fears may be done to him: if, rather than making comic mockery of a serious project, he were making serious use of a project first conceived for comic purposes.” But even though Aristophanes presents Praxagora’s model as a satirical one, this does not necessarily mean that having women as political actors is a part of the satire. Many of his ideas are ludicrous, especially those regarding the “detailed regulations governing sex (615–634),” but as I have argued thus far, he makes a very good case for female involvement in the *polis*.⁶³ The possibility that Plato took these ideas and adapted them to his utopian model attests to this, indicating that Aristophanes may have successfully motivated at least a portion of his audience to really think about the division of the sexes and whether restricting women’s influence mostly to the *oikos* was sensible.

Aristophanes further separates his portrayals of women as political actors from the hypothetical realm by mentioning *real* skills women possess that can be applied to the *polis*. While arguing with the Proboulos, Lysistrata compares political problem-solving to wool-working, advising him thusly:

Lysistrata: First of all, just like washing out a raw fleece, you should wash the sheep-dung out of the body politic in a bath, then put it on a bed, beat out the villains with a stick and pick off the burrs; and as for those people who combine and mat themselves together to gain office, you should card them out and pluck off the heads. Then card the wool into the work-basket of union and concord, mixing in everyone.” (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 574-80)

Working with wool was a skill learned by ancient Athenian women “as

63 Sommerstein, 15.

part of a gentlewoman's education," and so this metaphor does a fantastic job of showing how women could use their household skills as a theoretical basis for the running of a state. But Aristophanes mentions more practically applicable skills, too. One of the named benefits of female leadership is women's ability to keep state secrets, which is attested to in the following quotation:

Chremes: And he said that a woman was a being full of intelligence, and good at raising income. And he said that they don't leak the secrets of the Thesmophoria every time they hold it, whereas you and I, when we're on the Council, are always doing that.

(Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae*, 441-4)

Another argument for having women run the state is grounded in women's management of household finances. The usefulness of this skill in the political sphere is noted both by Praxagora and Lysistrata, who say:

Praxagora: [...] I say that we should hand over the City to the women. After all, we already employ them as managers and controllers of our households. (Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae*, 210-12)

Lysistrata: Don't we manage the household finances for you already? (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 495)

But the sources for women's management of family finance do not just come from Aristophanes; Euripides' characters make similar claims, as the playwright writes, "[Women] manage households [...] and no house deprived of a woman can be tidy and prosperous. [...] Why then should womankind be denigrated?"⁶⁵ And the evidence is not limited just to drama: in his *Laws*, Plato claims that the men in Greece hand over control of the money to their wives, providing further proof for female managerial expertise.² And the evidence is not limited just to drama: in his *Laws*, Plato claims that the men in Greece hand over control of the money to their wives, providing further proof for female managerial expertise. And so, given that the picture Aristophanes paints of Athenian society is much improved after the women use their home-acquired skills either to solve the city's issues or to restructure it completely, it

⁶⁵ Euripides, *Melanippe Captive*, 494, l. 5-25.

⁶⁶ Plato, *Laws*, 805e.

would seem that he is advocating for the aforementioned transfer of elements from the domestic sphere into the political one, and with it, the partial transfer of women from the confines of the home to the free political sphere.⁶⁷

And so, Aristophanes portrays the women of his three female-centric comedies as acting in a very political manner, and in two of the plays, as direct actors in the Athenian polis. The contrast between the political prowess of women and the incompetence of men in the plays—heightened by the caricatured feminization of the latter and the seemingly masculine characterization of the former while acting in accordance with feminine roles—establishes his female characters as possessing a natural aptitude for political involvement. In tandem with other theatrical, literary, and artistic indications of an overarching cultural move toward respecting women (and in the case of Plato's work, an explicit assertion that women have an equal capacity for justice and governance to that of men), it would seem that Aristophanes' portrayals of women, and their integration of *oikos* structures into the political sphere, serve to endorse the idea that women have an innate capacity for political action, and thus ought to be allowed into the Athenian *polis*.

Criticism of the Athenian Polis

Another reading of the transgressive portrayals of women in *Lys.*, *Eccl.*, and *Thesmo.* is that they serve mainly to criticize the political sphere and are not in fact concerned with the social position of women. According to Blundell, while from a modern perspective, the “framing of ideas about women may well appear to be the most significant issue raised by these plays,” it is unlikely that Aristophanes himself was “consciously addressing the ‘problem of women’.”⁶⁸ Shaw echoes this sentiment, arguing that Athenian literature only describes the “image of women,” and is thus not representative of what women actually do or could do.⁶⁹ Blundell takes this a step farther, arguing that the “separation of masculine and feminine spheres in fifth-century Athenian society made gender relations a fruitful base for the exploration of other differences,” the key “difference” in these plays being the division of

67 Hutchinson, “House Politics and City Politics,” 57.

68 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 177.

69 Shaw, “The Female Intruder,” 256.

and the relationship between the public and private spheres.⁷⁰

While the *oikos* and the *polis* are undoubtedly separated, they are not quite as distinct as they may seem. As mentioned in the previous section, women exercise a certain authority over the domestic sphere, particularly in the ordering of servants (as attested to by Calonicé at the beginning of *Lys.*) and in the management of the household finances. The shared qualities of the *polis* and *oikos* are thus dramatized by the division of the sexes in these plays, as the female intrusion into the former leads to the application of *oikos*-related skills into the political realm. Yet the real interplay between the two city spheres comes from male dominion over both Athenian representations of the home portray the *oikos* as an “extension of the masculine sphere of authority,” substantiating the view of the male as the ruler of both *polis* and *oikos*.⁷¹ Shaw makes a similar claim, arguing that a man’s “basic duty is to defend the *oikos* in the outside world,” which he does by associating with “other men, *the heads of other households* [italics mine], the largest association being the *polis* itself.”⁷²

This interconnected relationship between the two Athenian spheres also explains the women’s motives for democratic action in these plays: it is an attempt on their part to protect the private sphere. Shaw claims that in *Lys.*, the “violation of the female by the male [...] is a crime against the *oikos* and the women who live there. This crime is described in comic terms at the play’s beginning when Lysistrata complains, and her friends agree, that the women are being denied sex (99–110),” and then again when Lysistrata “describes the young girls whose youth is passing without hope of marriage because war has emptied Athens of men (594–97).”⁷³ Blundell adds that in *Eccl.*, it is “male mismanagement which [has] driven [the women] to take over the Assembly.”⁷⁴ Praxagora admits this when practicing speaking to the Assembly, which is all-male, aside from her and her band of women:

Praxagora: [...] You, the people, you are the cause of all this. You take public money in wages, and you each look out for a way to gain a profit for yourselves, while the public interest gets kicked around like Aesimus. (Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae*, 205-8)

70 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 173.

71 Blundell, 144.

72 Shaw, “The Female Intruder,” 257.

73 Shaw, 264.

74 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 178.

In *Thesmo.*, it is as a result of watching Euripides' plays—in which he portrays women as adulterous and conniving—that the men get suspicious of their wives, believing that they have lovers, and start to keep close guard over them.⁷⁵ This is why the women are holding an assembly—because they are “enraged by the fact that as a result of public theatrical performances their peaceful management of their households has been disrupted.”⁷⁶ Mica even specifies that it is “from no motive of ambition, by the Two Goddesses, ladies, that [she] has risen to speak.”⁷⁷ It should be noted that this kind of preface to a speech is a common rhetorician's trope, and may not reflect an actual lack of interest in public speaking on Mica's part. Regardless, on the whole it would seem that the women in the plays are entering the *polis* not because Aristophanes believes that women should be involved in political life; rather, the public sphere is just being run so poorly that, due to the interwoven nature of the public and private spheres, it is also affecting the latter, forcing the women to intervene.

But it is not just the *polis* that affects the *oikos*! The function of these feminine portrayals, in the context of a public dramatic festival that we cannot be certain women attended, is one that urges the largely, if not exclusively, male audience to think about this relationship between *polis* and *oikos*, which includes the latter's influence on the former. Shaw contends that Athenian drama and literature is not “about women's place in society,” and that similarly, drama “does not show us an actual society.”⁷⁸ But just because the society presented is not real does not mean that the fictional Athens Aristophanes depicts provides no useful information on or critique of the real Athens of the 4th and 5th centuries BCE! On the contrary, his “subversion of the seamless and inevitable “naturalness” of femininity” calls into question the authenticity and validity of what were construed as “social facts,” just as the Sophists of the period were doing (see again Note 53).⁷⁹ In *Eccl.*, the following conversation between the First and Second Woman exemplifies this:

First Woman: To begin with, I've got armpits that are bushier than a shrubbery, just as we agreed. Then, whenever my husband went off to the Agora, I oiled myself all over and stood in the sun all day to get a tan.

75 Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, lines 384–417.

76 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 178.

77 Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, lines 383–4.

78 Shaw, “The Female Intruder,” 255.

79 Ober, *Political Dissent*, 135, 134.

Second Woman: Me too; but the first thing I did was throw my razor out of the house, so that I would get hairy all over and not look like a woman at all any more. (Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae*, 60-7)

Ober puts the question this dialogue raises quite neatly: “If women are naturally hairy and brown like men, might they also be naturally political, like men?”⁸⁰ And if the natural state of a woman is such that she does “not look like a woman at all,” then what other “natural facts” are in fact socially crafted and, consequently, potentially foolish? The theatre served as the perfect venue for inspiring this kind of thinking, as its “elaborative civic framework” served to make it the official space for the presentation of ideas which “tended to question rather than endorse traditional values,” allowing Aristophanes to use unorthodox gender relations to highlight issues pertaining to the city’s polar structure.⁸¹ This also makes the argument that the playwright’s female portrayals followed a cultural trend of empowering women admissibly weaker, the role of theatrical performances—especially comedic ones—giving the audience some incentive not to take the plays too seriously, or at least not to consider what they depict as actually implementable. So the presence of underlying questions regarding women’s capacity for political action in these plays does not mean that Aristophanes is promoting female involvement in the *polis*. Rather, in line with the theatrical frameworks of the period, he *uses* the subversion of gender norms to represent a broader dichotomy, the clearly-presented questions about the divisions of men and women serving as a basis for transgressive questioning of the city structure as pertains to the relationship between the *polis* and the *oikos*.

While it would seem that Plato was nevertheless inspired by Aristophanes’ model society in *Eccl.*, potentially meaning that the Old Comic playwright was attempting to make a case for women’s innate capacity for political action, I would argue that both Aristophanes and Plato were likely inspired by another source entirely. Despite the lack of evidence for a common *textual* source or from any individual authority, both Socrates’ and Praxagora’s models are exceptionally similar to the way Sparta either was organized or was thought to be organized in the early 4th century BCE.⁸² Xenophon attests to the Spartan practice of

80 Ober, 136.

81 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 173.

82 I am indebted to Jonathan Hall for introducing me to the ideas that make up this part of my argument.

polyandry,⁸³ and Plutarch later maintains that “each man had authority, not as in other states over his own children, slaves, and property, but also over his neighbour’s in like manner as over his own, to the end that the [Spartan] people should, as much as possible, have all things in common.”⁸⁴ Spartan men also had to “gain entry to a group that dined together at common meals, in a “common mess” [συσσίτιον].”⁸⁵ These were “compulsory communal meals,” and if “any member failed to keep up his contributions, he was expelled from the mess and lost his full citizen rights.”⁸⁶ Moreover, while the “ownership of land remained extremely important in Spartan society,” ordinary currency in the form of “coined money was deliberately banned to try to discourage the accumulation of material goods,” perpetuating the myth of a completely communal, proto-communist Spartan lifestyle.⁸⁷ And so, while I am inclined to argue—as do Sommerstein and Adam—that Plato was partially inspired by Praxagora’s manifesto, turning the “socialistic burlesque of Aristophanes” into a serious proposal, I believe that either Aristophanes, Plato, or both were also, if not mainly, inspired by their impressions of Spartan society, making a much weaker case for the comic playwright’s potential endorsement of a more empowered view of women.⁸⁸

The role of the Lenaia and Dionysia as civic spaces dedicated to the subversion of social mores is not the only reason that drama was the ideal medium for the gendered representation of the relationship between *oikos* and *polis*; the physical structure of the theatre was an integral component as well. Blundell asserts that the “complex dialectical relationship” between the public and private spheres was well represented by the backdrop of the theatre, which “usually represented the front of a house.”⁸⁹ This creates a clear division between what the audience sees—“the open space of the exterior public world”—and the “hidden regions of the private interior”: a complete separation of the *polis* from the *oikos*.⁹⁰ But the backdrop also had a door, marking the entrance and exit of female characters in particular, allowing them to both intrude into and recede from the public sphere as was fit.⁹¹ As

83 Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, 1.8.

84 Plutarch, *Instituta Laconica*, 10.

85 Martin, *Classical Greek History*, 6.11.

86 Martin, 6.11.

87 Martin, 6.13.

88 Adam, *Appendices to Book V of Republic*, 346.

89 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 179.

90 Blundell, 179.

Blundell puts it, “[t]he backdrop which divides men and women becomes the focal point of their confrontations—the point at which public and private concerns intersect.”⁹²

This intersection is characterized in particular by Athens’ pressing need for harmony. While it is not the focus of this paper, it is impossible to disentangle Athens’ internal affairs from the external political issues at hand. Both *Lys.* and *Thesmo.* were performed in 411 BCE, at the height of the Peloponnesian War. The Sicilian Expedition, having just ended in defeat in 413, had been a devastating, disastrous mission, and the “perilous external situation went hand-in-hand with an extremely threatening domestic situation,” as the “military failures of the democratic administration gave the oligarchs their opportunity to restrict and perhaps even eliminate the democracy.”⁹³ The oligarchs were set on the war with Sparta having a very direct effect on Athens’ internal politics, the “establishment of a new governing body of ten probouloi” being just the beginning.⁹⁴ And so both *Lys.* and *Thesmo.* took place in a “constantly worsening situation which threatened Athens [...] in both the internal and external political spheres.”⁹⁵ There certainly is a sense of panhellenism prevalent throughout the plays, especially in the aforementioned wool-working metaphor, but the influence of political criticisms presented at the Lenaia and the Dionysia was far too important to be squandered on the propagation of a “practically impossible peace”—a fact Aristophanes was surely well aware of.⁹⁶ While a return to the time of the Persian Wars, when Sparta and Athens not only got along, but were in fact allies, seems inconceivable, “a reconciliation of domestic factions struggling among themselves seems [...] to be not a utopian conception but a plausible aspiration, bringing internal strength to Athens.”⁹⁷ In fact, this is not the only time Aristophanes advocates for domestic, political reunion in his plays—the parabasis of the *Frogs* made an exceptional impact on Athenian politics, a fact known because the advice presented was actually implemented. In lines 686–705, “the chorus recommend that those who ‘went wrong . . . through being tripped up by the wiles of Phrynichus’ (i.e. those who joined or supported the oligarchy of the Four Hundred in 411) should be given the

91 Blundell, 179.

92 Blundell, 179.

93 Newiger, “War and Peace,” 153.

94 Newiger, 153.

95 Newiger, 153.

96 Newiger, 156.

97 Newiger, 158.

opportunity to make amends,” and just a few months later, a decree calling “for the erasure and oblivion of all records of disfranchisement against those who had been involved in the oligarchy (with a few exceptions)” was carried out.⁹⁸ *The Frogs* was written in 405 BCE, so it is not unreasonable to think that Aristophanes could have been trying to promote a similar internal peace just six years prior, with a focus on the *polis* and *oikos* instead.

So in illustrating a reconciliation among factions, particularly with regards to the division of the public and private spheres, Aristophanes is critiquing the polar city structure, advocating for general harmony within Athens. The creation of concord is a virtue that Shaw prescribes to the home, as the “wife’s virtues, [...] demanded by the *oikos*,” are motherly “love, industry, and the ability to create harmony.”⁹⁹ This is integral to a modicum of stability within the political sphere, as women’s work “consists in making the home prosper, and through the home, the city, and through the city, the whole of Greece.”¹⁰⁰ And the women in these plays do represent a certain national unity! The women in *Lys.* are not just Athenians—Lampito, the Lacedaemonian, is a very vocal character, but Boeotian and Peloponnesian women are also present. This motif of reunion, both on the private and public level, is also represented by the semi-choruses of old men and old women who are able to come together in the end. While their reconciliation is more of a domestic one, the old couples’ original falling out came from a coup d’état. Similarly, the younger women’s enforcement of abstinence is wholly *oikos*-related in nature, but both schemes are necessary to achieve peace in the play, further reinforcing the idea that external and internal politics go hand in hand.

And this need for balance in both the *polis* and *oikos*, as well as between them, is heightened by the implausibility of the scenarios Aristophanes presents. “Order in one sphere is inextricably related to order in the other,” and yet the schemes that the women present are, on their surface, detrimental to private life.¹⁰¹ Lysistrata’s ban on sex would result in the “extinction of the households which she is determined to defend; while the legislation in favour of free love which is introduced by the female infiltrators in *Women in the Assembly* will have the effect of demolishing the nuclear family.”¹⁰² Foley takes this to be a sign that

98 Sommerstein, “The politics of Greek comedy,” 296.

99 Shaw, “The Female Intruder,” 256.

100 Croiset, *Aristophanes and the Political Parties*, 134.

101 Foley, “The ‘Female Intruder’ Reconsidered,” 3.

102 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 178.

they are therefore acting against the interests of the *oikos*, which I do not agree with.¹⁰³ I would argue that Aristophanes has the women of his plays propose these household-dismantling solutions to showcase the fact that the proposals are not truly about the *oikos*. This is made quite obvious in *Lys.*, as a total ban on sex is not Lysistrata's end goal—it is intended to serve as a temporary measure to be done away with once the men establish peace. Foley herself expresses a need for nuance regarding the division of the city spheres, contending that Shaw's "simple structural equation [of] female:male as *oikos*:polis [...] does not hold," which would support the idea that the influence of these *oikos*-impacting decisions is not contained within the private sphere.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Hutchinson touches on the extent of the *polis* and *oikos*' interplay and its relation to proposed peace in the following quotation: "The scene where Lysistrata speaks to the ambassador combines political rhetoric in an inter-city structure with the sexual attraction that cements the structure of the *oikos*."¹⁰⁵ And so, the massive impact that the women's actions would have on private life does the exact opposite of what one might expect: it reinforces the idea that these reversals are not meant to be serious by any means, and consequently do not serve as a simple commentary on the private sphere. Rather, it is "the moral preparation for peace, the appeal to sentiments which are to make it possible, that interests [Aristophanes], and that he regards as his task."¹⁰⁶

Now, given the plays' focus on the importance of the interplay between city spheres, can Aristophanes' portrayals of women in *Lys.*, *Eccl.*, and *Thesm.* even be regarded as criticizing the *polis* specifically? I would say so! A critique of the city structure as pertains to the division of *polis* and *oikos* is inherently a critique of the former, as the people who run the domestic domain have no agency in the real Athens of the fourth and fifth centuries BCE. As I have argued above, the women, though they run the *oikos*, are not even in charge of it; it is "the male" who inhabits the position of "ruler of both *polis* and *oikos*."¹⁰⁷ Male "conviction that the public sphere can command priority over the private precipitate[s] opposition which exposes clashes of interest," meaning that the men, who exclusively make up the *polis*, are the ones in control of the relationship that the two spheres have to

103 Foley, "The 'Female Intruder' Reconsidered," 2.

104 Foley, "The 'Female Intruder' Reconsidered," 3.

105 Hutchinson, *House Politics and City Politics*, 57.

106 Croiset, *Aristophanes and the Political Parties*, 141.

107 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 177.

each other, and who have created this discordant city structure.¹⁰⁸ So, in demonstrating the importance of the relationship between the public and private spheres, Aristophanes is critiquing the running of Athens on a cultural scale, which thus manifests as political criticism.

Following Blundell's arguments regarding the function of the exploration of gender relations in Athenian drama (as well as the role the physical structure of the theatre played in representations of public vs. private space), it would seem that Aristophanes' depictions of women are actually being used to criticize the running of the Athenian *polis*. The playwright uses the division of the sexes to represent the broader division and relationship between the two city spheres; he also underscores their interconnectedness, which is exemplified by the power that men exert over both the public and domestic domains. Taking into consideration the evidence that Plato may have been inspired by the organization of Spartan society, and not just by Aristophanes, as well as the broader context of an incredibly perilous political situation—both external and internal to Athens—I would argue that Aristophanes uses the subversion of gender norms not to advocate for women's involvement in the political sphere, but rather to advise the rulers of the *polis* of the benefits that arise from the two spheres' reconciliation.

Conclusion

What are we to make of the transgressive portrayals of women in *Lys.*, *Eccl.*, and *Thesmo.*? By depicting women as acting politically in a variety of ways, Aristophanes draws attention to the interplay between the *polis* and *oikos*—but does this serve mainly to advocate a more empowered view of the members of the domestic sphere, or to criticize the political one? The women of these plays are largely presented in a very positive light, especially as—not in spite of their being—infiltrators of the Athenian *polis*. However, the view that the plays are therefore fundamentally about women is largely naïve, and based predominantly on an initial, context-less reading of the scripts. After evaluating the body of evidence, I would argue that Aristophanes depicts women as political actors not to suggest that they should become involved in the *polis*, but to question the contemporary *polis*' efficacy. He uses gender relations as a base framework to bolster awareness of the interconnectedness of the public and private spheres, advocating a more harmonious city structure. And yet, as speculated by Sommerstein, Adam, et

108 Blundell, 177.

al., it is possible that Plato was heavily influenced by Aristophanes in the creation of his gender-blind image of the Guardians, on top of the inspiration he may have derived from Spartan society. This suggests that while the comic playwright likely did not intend for his plays to be interpreted as endorsing a view of women as capable political actors, his works may still have inspired others to do so, helping elevate women's position in ancient Athenian society after all.

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