

Athenian Conversation about *Lysistrata*

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It was getting late in the afternoon. The sun had almost fully set over Athens and many citizens were walking to their homes after having just seen a play. Two of these citizens, Sarcondis and Phete, walked side by side towards their homes. Old men now, they had both served in the Athenian military during the last critical battles of the Persian Wars. The play they had just seen, *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, had struck a particular cord with both of the aged men, and they had been quiet during their walk home. Sarcondis, however, had regularly shaken his head and sighed loudly during their walk, until at last he could not contain himself.

“When I was young, a play like that would never have been allowed to be shown,” he said bitterly, and he shook his head. Phete had been chuckling to himself every now and again, remembering certain parts of the play, when he lifted his head to respond to his friend.

“What do you mean Sarcondis?”

“Blatant sedition, that’s what it is Phete, blatant sedition. We should not tolerate such outbursts by a member of our community, especially during a time of war!” Phete laughed quietly and looked off into the twilight.

“Oh, I don’t know Sarcondis. I thought it was rather funny. Nothing about it particularly insulted me.”

“Insulted indeed!” snorted Sarcondis. “I do not deny that it had its funny parts, though to do so Aristophanes had to resort to sexual or bodily humor – the lowest form of comedy in my opinion – but we cannot excuse such behavior just because it is funny.”

“Well, what do you mean, my friend?” said Phete. “I am not sure I recall these blatant acts of sedition that you are referring to.”

“I thought it was fairly obvious. Aristophanes had his characters say things that were obviously anti-Athenian. For instance, I remember a scene when *Lysistrata* herself

commented that Athenians made a habit of being late. I presume she was referring to how we've hardly been able to properly prevent our allies from rebelling against us, for when we embark to prevent the rebellion we always arrive late.¹

"So you agree that it is true that we do tend to be late to things?"

"That isn't the point Phete. It doesn't matter if it is true or not. If man says something that places Athens in a negative light, all that does is stir up trouble and plant the seeds of rebellion. I also remember a scene when Lysistrata praised the looks of a Spartan—a *Spartan*—woman, over the looks of an Athenian!²

"Oh I doubt that was said in any seriousness."

"How do you know? For all I know Aristophanes was mocking our own free-born Athenian citizens. There are no women in this world finer and fairer than our Athenian women, and here he mocks them! He also called us, the very audience of his play, mere riff raff,³ he said our citizenry was full of dung and villains,⁴ and he said we made better decisions while drunk than sober!⁵

"Bah, you are just picking at the play, Sarcondis. If a man tries, he can find fault in nearly everything. So far you have merely brought forth evidence that Aristophanes is an irreverent man and that he enjoys mocking people; two things which are hardly evidence of sedition. I remind you that sedition means to incite folks into rebellion, and the only thing you have proven in the examples you have used is that he thinks we Athenians—if not all Greeks—are just really silly."

Sarcondis nodded as the two men continued to walk down the torch-lit street. He shrugged.

"I could go on though, Phete. I merely recalled these instances to prove the man's intense anti-Athenian prejudice."

"I do not think one can conclude that."

¹ Aristophanes, *Lysistrata and other plays*. Translated by Alan H. Sommerstein (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973, 2002)

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² Aristophanes, 144

³ Aristophanes, 147

⁴ Aristophanes, 163

⁵ Aristophanes, 190

“I could bring up more serious instances that have much more drastic implications. He says outright, using Lysistrata to do so, that we Athenians have been foolish in our military decisions and have made many blunders, and goes on to say that our entire campaign all these many years has been stupid, inferring even that a woman could do a better job at planning our strategies!⁶”

“Maybe he has a point.”

“Nonsense. We are Athenians, and we do not easily make mistakes. If we ever fail at something it is because we have been victim of treachery, which is something no power, however great, can fully prevent.”

Phete stopped walking and gazed at his friend in amazement, for the comment seemed obviously ridiculous to him, but Sarcondis’ face was serious and his expression was earnest, and Phete chose not to argue the issue. He continued walking beside his friend.

“He even inferred that we Athenians actually owed the Spartans for what they did against the Thessalians, as if they did some great thing that saved our city!⁷”

“To be fair, he also inferred that the Spartans owed us a favor as well, for what we did to help them when Messenia threatened them, sending Cimon with an army to their aid.”

“That goes without saying, my friend. Of course they owe us, for we have been nothing but good to them up until the war started, and it is they that first attacked Plataea, starting the war. But we have always defended ourselves by our own might and by the might of our allies, and to suggest that we should end this war and make peace because we somehow owe the Spartans is absurd. He tops off the list of ridiculous claims by suggesting that the war could be ended by diplomacy – diplomacy of all things!⁸ Does this not betray his lack of knowledge of how states interact? There is no deal we could ever make with the Spartans and her allies to end this war short of

⁶ Aristophanes, 161

⁷ Aristophanes, 187

⁸ Aristophanes, 163

razing our own walls and becoming subject to the Peloponnesians. And I'll be dead before I ever bow before their kind!"

"I think I may see your point," said Phete. "After all, the play's central theme consists of all the women in the Hellas rebelling against their states to force an end to the war, and I suppose it could be argued that this is an attempt to incite a rebellion. I do believe that the actors even referred to the women in the audience when mentioning this far fetched scheme, urging them to follow the theme of the play. Perhaps Aristophanes was somewhat serious when he came up with his sex-strike idea, and harbored some sort of vain hope that the women in the audience would take up his cause and refuse their husbands when they came at them tenderly, holding their libidos hostage until the war ended. But, then again, in his play he also had the Spartan women rebel, as well as the women in the rest of the Hellenes, so...to suggest that the play was an attempt to get Athenians to rebel against our democracy is a bit short sighted, I think."

"No, no," said Sarcondis shaking his head, "you give him too much leniency, and this is what is poisoning our society. If we make an example out of Aristophanes we will have no more anti-Athenian and anti-war outbursts from our own community. It is talk like this that will be the true downfall of Athens, if we ever were to fall, and I call upon whatever god has the slightest sympathy towards our city to prevent such an atrocity from happening. If we fall it will be from the inside, my dear Phete, not the outside, and that is why sedition is such a heinous crime. And of all the atrocities—of all the ill-begotten, treacherous words that that fool conjured up to sally against fair Athens, his cursing of the Sicilian expedition is the absolute worst!⁹ We should have won that. We *would* have won if not for the weak-willed backbiters in our city and in the army. The men in that army were strong and eager to win a victory for Athens, and Aristophanes curses them! Larcondis was a good boy, he was a patriotic boy, he..."

Sarcondis stopped in his tracks and placed the palms of his hands in his eyes to hold off his tears. His old, bent frame shivered, and he choked back his sorrow. Phete,

⁹ Aristophanes, 156

with nothing but compassion for his old friend, put his arm around Sarcondis and held him. Sarcondis couldn't resist any longer and let his tears flow freely, though he still covered his face.

"I refuse to believe that my son died for nothing," he said weakly. Phete held the heartbroken father and gazed off into the now pitch-black city.

"I have no comforting words for you," said Phete, "except that, knowing the kind of man that Larcondis was, he must have stood at the front of each battle, and never would he have fled from a fight, even if he was the only Athenian there. He was a man that encapsulated every feature that we Athenians hold dear. He was Athens, and his memory is no shameful one."

"That these evil days should be ours!" said Sarcondis haltingly. "When our brothers become our enemies and they ally themselves with the Mede. When our sons are destroyed like slaves, and our generals take true-born Athenian life for granted. I would have never imagined such evil times, when as a lad I fought against the true enemy, O! this world is utterly decrepit."

"Such is the way of man, my friend. And it makes me wonder why we should ever conclude our wars. For when we fought the Mede, all the Hellenes were united against true evil, but once we won, we turned against each other. Man must fight, and if he has no enemies to fight, he makes enemies. What, then, if we do win this war? Who will we fight? Who will be left but ourselves? Will we attack every ally we have for their tiniest faults until we truly are an island in a sea of hostility? Or will we become a nation divided and succumb to stasis, within our very walls? Our days are indeed evil, but not as evil as they could be."

"That brings me no comfort."

Sarcondis wiped his eyes and pulled away from Phete. He looked out into the city, and could see little but what was illuminated by the torches that lined the streets. An evening breeze picked up and dried his eyes, and he closed them, inhaling.

"I smell nothing but death upon this wind. I fear what tomorrow will bring."

“Tomorrow,” said Phete, “will bring another dreary day in Athens. You will get up, order your slaves, sell some cloth, make a drachma, lose a drachma, barter with citizens, laugh with citizens, and then you will go home to your plain wife who has lost her youth and sleep in your hard bed. And so will I. We can hope for nothing more, and if we become so restless that we become hasty and volatile, we may make decisions that put our way of life, as dreary as it is, at risk, and might open the door to death and revolution. Go home Sarcondis. Have no high expectations for tomorrow. Live slowly and content, for that is the best defense against this death you smell.”

Sarcondis nodded and grinned sheepishly.

“Good night Phete,” he said, and he walked towards his home. Phete gazed long at the back of his friend. There went a true Athenian, an honest, loyal Athenian that spent his life and one of his sons in defense of Athens, her beauty and her democracy. There went the backbone of Athens, not archons or strategoi or members of the boule. If this man could be so beaten in his old age to be on the verge of hopelessness, this man who had fought harder than any and who had given his being to Athens, where then lay the hope for the rest of the citizenry? Already there were whispers and murmurs through the streets, omens of discontent and of rebellion, dark words of rich men seeking domination and the ever present fear gliding on the wind and wafting through the streets; *oligarchy, oligarchy*.

“Good night, old friend.”