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*A Comic Adynaton: Interactions of Rhetorical Patterns and  
Obscene Humour in Aristophanes' Lysistrata 672-681\**

**Abstract**

L'articolo propone una reinterpretazione di Aristofane, *Lysistrata* 672-681, basata sull'osservazione della struttura retorica del passo e delle sue relazioni con i temi e gli spunti comici di questi versi. Dal punto di vista tematico, il passo ruota attorno alla nozione di rovesciamento dei ruoli di genere, come dimostra l'accenno ad Artemisia di Alicarnasso e alle Amazzoni. Questo tema è ulteriormente enfaticizzato e articolato dalla struttura retorica dei versi 672-681: l'*adynaton*. La presenza dell'*adynaton* getta sul tema del rovesciamento una luce inquietante e la sovversione dei ruoli di genere è descritta con toni decisamente negativi. In questo quadro, i doppi sensi osceni che pervadono il passo sembrano avere la funzione di 'neutralizzare' le potenzialità negative del rovesciamento e a ricondurlo alla sfera familiare del sesso. In questa prospettiva, i versi 672-681 di *Lysistrata* sarebbero non solo un'efficace occasione di umorismo osceno, ma rappresenterebbero un momento cruciale nella costruzione della tensione tra rovesciamento e ordinarietà che sostiene la trama della commedia.

This paper reinterprets Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* 672-681, by investigating the interactions among the rhetorical structure of this passage, its themes and comedic elements. The passage is centred on the theme of reversal in gender norms, and this emerges evidently with the mention of Artemisia of Halicarnassus and the Amazons. This theme gains greater depth through the rhetorical pattern that shapes these lines: the *adynaton*. The *adynaton* adds a further nuance to the passage's central theme, as it casts a negative light on the reversal of gender roles and describes it with catastrophic overtones. In this picture, the obscene jokes that pervade the passage seem intended at balancing the disruptive potential of the reversal in gender roles and to include this in the familiar sphere of sex. Through this analysis, lines 672-681 turn out to be not only an occasion for obscene humour, but a crucial moment to create the tension between reversal and normality that sustains the plot in *Lysistrata*.

The parabolic scene of *Lysistrata* stages a confrontation between the two semi-choruses of Old Women and Old Men. Whereas the Old Women passionately defend female participation in public life, the Old Men maintain the stubborn attitude that characterizes male personae throughout the play. They believe that the women's commitment to ending the war is an oligarchic conspiracy (616-25) which they are determined to stop. The Old Men's parts in the parabolic scene culminate in epirrhema B, where they picture the extreme consequences of women's involvement in public affairs: women will end up waging war against men and, for this reason, they must be punished right away.

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\* I would like to thank professors Michele Napolitano and Maurizio Sonnino, and doctors Matthew Shelton and Nicolas Wiater for their valuable comments and observations on these pages.

## ΚΟΡΥΦΑΙΟΣ

εἰ γὰρ ἐνδώσει τις ἡμῶν ταῖσδε κᾶν σμικρὰν λαβήν,  
οὐδὲν ἐλλείψουσιν αὐταὶ λιπαροῦς χειρουργίας,  
ἀλλὰ καὶ ναῦς τεκτανοῦνται, κάπιχειρήσουσ' ἔτι  
ναυμαχεῖν καὶ πλεῖν ἐφ' ἡμάς, ὥσπερ Ἀρτεμισία.  
ἦν δ' ἐφ' ἵππικὴν τράπωνται, διαγράφω τοὺς ἱππέας·  
ἵππικώτατον γὰρ ἐστὶ χρῆμα κάποχον γυνή,  
κοῦκ ἂν ἀπολίσθοι τρέχοντος. τὰς δ' Ἀμαζόνας σκόπει,  
ἃς Μίκων ἔγραψ' ἐφ' ἵππων μαχομένας τοῖς ἀνδράσιν.  
ἀλλὰ τούτων χρῆν' ἀπασῶν ἐς τετρημένον ξύλον  
ἐγκαθαρμόσαι λαβόντας τουτονὶ τὸν ἀχένα. (672-81)

MEN'S LEADER If any men among us give these women even the tiniest handhold, there's no limit to what their nimble hands will do. Why, they'll even be building frigates and launching naval attacks, cruising against us like Artemisia. And if they turn to horsemanship, you can scratch our cavalry: there's nothing like a woman when it comes to mounting and riding; even riding hard she won't slip off. Just look at the Amazons in Mikon's paintings, riding charges in battle against men. Our duty is clear: grab each woman's neck and lock it in the wooden stocks!<sup>1</sup>

These lines contain a number of obscene allusions, as the description of the women's activities involves transparent metaphors for sex. This aspect has drawn much scholarly attention: interpreters have punctually examined the sexual metaphors and the passage has been mainly discussed as a brilliant piece of obscene humour<sup>2</sup>. As a consequence, other aspects of this passage have remained unexplored.

In this paper, I will consider some of these aspects, focusing on the theme of reversal in epirrhema B and its articulation throughout the passage. I will argue that the theme of reversal reverberates at different levels within epirrhema B. It emerges from the literal sense of lines 672-81 and appears to be connected to a sense of threat, especially in the mention of Artemisia of Halicarnassus and the Amazons as women warriors who fought against Athens. At the same time, the theme of reversal is stressed further by the rhetorical arrangement of the passage. Epirrhema B – I suggest – is shaped as an *adynaton* and thus reproduces the meanings and functions of this rhetorical pattern, traditionally used to describe ruinous upheavals in the world's natural order. The significance of this rhetorical arrangement increases if we consider its rarity in comedy, where *adynata* are seldom used. The *adynaton* in *Lysistrata* 672-81 should be therefore evaluated in its connection with the theme of the passage. I would argue that the *adynaton* in epirrhema B greatly contributes to depict the reversal of gender roles in *Lysistrata* as an utterly negative event and portrays the women's takeover in a disturbing light. In view of this rhetorical arrangement, the sense of epirrhema B appears to be less playful than it may seem from its extensive involvement in obscene humour. Rather, the content and

<sup>1</sup> All texts and translations from *Lysistrata* are by HENDERSON (2000).

<sup>2</sup> See especially HENDERSON (1980, 204; 1987, 160 *ad Lys.* 672-79); SOMMERSTEIN (1990: 191f. *ad Lys.* 673-79); SONNINO (2018, 249f. *ad Lys.* 677-79).

rhetorical features of this passage suggest that the role of obscene jokes in lines 672-81 may need to be reconsidered. I shall argue that the jokes are not only an easy way to humour, but they perform a precise role, as they balance and downplay the disruptive potential of the reversal expressed through the *adynaton*. The rhetorical structure and the humorous aspects therefore form a contrasting combination, which ultimately creates the meaning of the passage and its dramatic function. This reading shows that epirrhema B represents an essential moment in the articulation of the theme of reversal within the play. The passage thus gains a complexity in meaning that stems from the combination of literal sense, rhetorical structure, and obscene humour and has not been acknowledged so far.

### *A scenario of reversal*

The sense of the epirrhema B is clear: as a closure to their interventions in the parabolic debate, the Old Men make a point of stopping the women's current action, that is, their intervention in public life. They do so through a sort of *reductio ad absurdum*, by illustrating the paradoxical consequences that would follow if women were let free to pursue their intentions. Women – the Old Men claim – will take over in every sphere of manly activities, including manual labour and war. These spheres are selected as the most representative of manly occupations and, as Sommerstein (1990, 192 *ad Lys.* 676) has pointed out, these must have been perceived as «the most unwomanly of all unwomanly activities». The result is a hypothetical scenario in which the world is reversed, the fixed and immutable norms that regulate social life and relations between the sexes are broken.

Therefore, the perspective of an upside-down world is imagined as an absurd hypothesis, formulated as an argument to support the Old Men's views. However, the Old Men relate the situation on stage to historical and mythical precedents, connecting this hypothetical scenario to the past of Athens. Occurrences of reversals in gender roles are identified in Artemisia of Halicarnassus and the Amazons who, at different times, waged war against Athens<sup>3</sup>. Memories of these characters must have been vivid in Athens at the time of *Lysistrata* and a connection between the Persians and the Amazons was already established. This is testified by the paintings of the Stoa Poikile – explicitly mentioned in

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<sup>3</sup> Artemisia is the Carian queen who led a contingent of Xerxes' army during the Persian wars and stood out among the Persian generals for her value in the battle of Salamis and for her wisdom: cf. Hdt. VII 99; VIII 68f., 87f., 93. The Amazons are the mythical women warrior, who were said to have marched against Athens in mythical times: cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 685-90, Isocr. IV 68-70, Dem. LX 8, Pl. *Menex.* 239b, Paus. I 15-17. About Artemisia of Halicarnassus in Herodotus, see VIGNOLO MUSON (1988), HARRELL (2003) and SEBILLOTTE-CUCHET (2009). In addition, see DEWALD (2013) for a comprehensive account of women in Herodotus' work. Regarding the Amazons, broad overviews are offered by DUBOIS (1982), BLOK (1995), BREMER (2000), MAYOR (2014) and PENROSE (2016).

epirrhema B (679)<sup>4</sup> – and by the use, throughout the 5<sup>th</sup> century, of the victory against the Amazons as a mythical paradigm for the Athenian victory in the Persian wars<sup>5</sup>.

Most importantly, literary sources independent from this Aristophanic passage, show how the memory of Artemisia and the Amazons must have been closely linked to the notion of reversal. As a matter of fact, the texts dealing with Artemisia and the Amazons invariably stress the theme of reversal. Concerning Artemisia, Herodotus suggests this aspect already when he first introduces her. In VII 99, 1, the historian states that Artemisia was a great marvel to him (θῶμα ποιεῦμαι): despite being a woman, she waged war against the Greeks (ἐπὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα στρατευσαμένης γυναικός), driven only by her valour (ἀνδρηίης ἐστρατεύετο)<sup>6</sup>. The notion of reversal becomes explicit later, when Xerxes, assisting to Artemisia's success in the battle of Salamis, observes: «my men have become women, and my women men» (οἱ μὲν ἄνδρες γεγόνασι μοι γυναῖκες, αἱ δὲ γυναῖκες ἄνδρες, VIII 88, 3). Regarding the Amazons, their connection with the image of the upside-down world is especially intimate and is reflected in Athens in highly representative texts, such as funeral orations<sup>7</sup>. That attributed to Lysias emphasizes the problematic coexistence, in the Amazons, of a feminine nature and a masculine attitude (ἐνομίζοντο δὲ διὰ τὴν εὐψυχίαν μᾶλλον ἄνδρες ἢ διὰ τὴν φύσιν γυναῖκες, II 4). In addition, the Amazons were commonly associated with the utter reversal of Greek social norms. This is testified by ethnographic accounts: Herodotus (IV 112f.) describes the Amazons' sexual freedom, and Strabo (XI 5, 1) stresses their involvement in typically manly activities such as hunting and war, thus creating a picture of the Amazons that is diametrically opposed to the habits of Greek – and especially Athenian – women.

The mention of Artemisia and the Amazons thus automatically entails the concept of reversal in gender norms and epirrhema B draws attention to this theme as relevant for the whole comedy. This has not been overlooked by interpreters, who have evaluated this passage as a significant moment for the development of this theme throughout the play<sup>8</sup> and the reference to Artemisia and the Amazons as an intertextual model for the women of *Lysistrata*<sup>9</sup>. What has not been fully explored is the complexity of meaning of epirrhema B, which engages with the theme of reversal on multiple levels and, I would

<sup>4</sup> The paintings of the Stoa Poikile are described by Paus. I 15. The association Artemisia-Amazons in *Lys.* 672-81 may reflect the association Persians-Amazons, represented in the Stoa paintings: LANDFESTER (2019, 159 *ad Lys.* 678f.) highlights this parallelism. Regarding the grounds on which the Persians and Amazons were associated in the Stoa paintings, see CASTRIOTA (2005), who notices a pattern of 'feminization' of the defeated enemy throughout the Stoa iconographic programme.

<sup>5</sup> This is the common explanation for the great popularity that the Amazonomachy gains as an iconographic motif throughout the 5<sup>th</sup> century: see DUBOIS (1982, 78-94).

<sup>6</sup> The contrast between femininity and masculinity in this passage is noticed by HARRELL (2003, 80) and VANNICELLI – CORCELLA (2017, 413f. *ad loc.*).

<sup>7</sup> On the presence of the Amazons in Athenian funeral orations, their connection with the Persians and the ideological implications see LORAUX (1986, 56-77).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. MORWOOD (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. BOWIE (1996), who focuses solely on the Amazons, in a study which seeks to identify the mythical suggestions in Aristophanes' comedies.

argue, conveys definite nuances to it. On the literal level, reversal is used as a powerful means of argument, as the hypothetical scenario described by the Old Men intendedly prove the need to restrain women. The content of the passage provides further articulation of this theme: by recalling two precedents of women warriors who attacked Athens, the Old Men imply that the women's takeover is a threat to the city and therefore shadows the depiction of the reversal. This negative nuance is emphasized and amplified by the rhetorical structure adopted in epirrhema B, which has been overlooked so far and which, instead, appears to have significant consequences for the meaning of the passage. The presence of the *adynaton* indicates that the reversal is perceived as a ruinous disruption of the world's natural laws and suggests that obscene humour should be re-interpreted in light of this aspect.

*The pattern of adynaton: catastrophic nuances in gender reversals*

To identify epirrhema B as an *adynaton*, it is essential to establish the distinctive features of this rhetorical pattern. This may be not an easy task, since the *adynaton* lacks a precise definition. It was not codified in ancient rhetorical theories and this has led to some oscillations in the definitions provided by modern studies<sup>10</sup>. However, it may be possible to recognize the *adynaton* on the basis of its consistently recurring features, as they are described by Guidorizzi (1985), in a study on the uses of this rhetorical device in Greek literature. The *adynaton* contains two propositions: one (X) refers to an event that may occur; the other one (Y) to a reversal, most frequently imagined as concerning the natural world. These two members are related in temporal terms: X will happen *when/sooner than/as soon as* Y happens. The effect is to strongly dismiss the possibility of X occurring, by considering it the condition of the reversal (Y), which cannot happen. In other words, the immutable order of the world – which cannot be reversed – ensures that a certain event will not occur.

To observe these features in place, we may consider a conspicuous instance of *adynaton*, in Herodotus V 92α. Here, Socles of Corinth intends to persuade the Spartans not to support the Athenian tyrants, and he opens his speech with an *adynaton*:

ἦ δὴ ὁ τε οὐρανὸς ἔνερθε ἔσται τῆς γῆς καὶ ἡ γῆ μετέωρος ὑπὲρ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, καὶ ἄνθρωποι νομὸν ἐν θαλάσῃ ἔξουσι καὶ ἰχθύες τὸν πρότερον ἄνθρωποι, ὅτε γε ὑμεῖς ὧ Λακεδαιμόνιοι ἰσοκρατίας καταλύοντες τυραννίδας ἐς τὰς πόλεις κατάγειν παρασκευάζεσθε, τοῦ οὔτε ἀδικώτερον ἐστὶ οὐδὲν κατ' ἀνθρώπους οὔτε μαιφονώτερον.

<sup>10</sup> About the figure of *adynaton* in classical literatures, see CANTER (1930), DUTOIT (1936), COCCHIARA (1963, 70-91), ROWE (1965), MANZO (1979), GUIDORIZZI (1985). A recent and comprehensive summary of the status of the *adynaton* in ancient and modern rhetorical theories is provided by VILLALBA DE LA GÚIDA (2010, 79-83).

Verily the heaven shall be beneath the earth and the earth aloft above the heaven, and men shall dwell in the sea and fishes where men did dwell before, now that you, Lacedaemonians! are destroying the rule of equals and making ready to bring back despotism into the cities—despotism, a thing as unrighteous and bloodthirsty as aught on this earth<sup>11</sup>.

The aim is to present the undesirable event – i.e. the establishment of a tyranny – as being equally absurd and impossible as an utter reversal of the natural order.

This passage from Herodotus also shows two major implications of *adynata*, detected by Guidorizzi (1985, 21). Guidorizzi notices that, compared to other traditional motifs of upside-down worlds – such as the Land of Cockaigne or the Golden Age –, the reversals pictured in *adynata* are always closely linked to a possible human action, on which the reversal depends. Therefore, the *adynaton* lays emphasis on human involvement. The *adynaton* also differs from other types of depictions of upside-down worlds because it presents the reversal in a definitely negative light, as a permanent and destructive disturbance of the natural order, which possibly threatens human survival<sup>12</sup>. Thus, *adynata* apparently specialize in depicting undesirable changes in nature and imply that the dreaded reversal may be only prevented if certain human actions are excluded or condemned.

On the basis of the features of *adynata* observed so far, we are now able to identify an *adynaton* in *Lysistrata*'s epirrhema B. As a matter of fact, this passage has all the features just described, with only minor variations compared to Herodotus' use of this rhetorical pattern. In epirrhema B, the Old Men relate an event that may occur – men giving in to women (672) – to a picture of reversal, in which women engage in typically male activities (673-78). The reversal envisaged does not affect the laws of nature, as in Socles' *adynaton*, but rather affects social norms and gender roles. However, as I will show below, social and gender norms are regarded as being just as immutable as the natural order, of which they are a reflection<sup>13</sup>. The two propositions of the *adynaton* are connected through a temporal nexus, as indicated by the syntactic structure of lines 672-81. Here, the conditional clause is constructed with the future tense (εἰ γὰρ ἐνδώσει τις ... / οὐδὲν ἐλλείψουσιν αὐτάι, 672f.)<sup>14</sup>. This appears to reflect the temporal relation usually established between the two propositions in *adynata*. At the same time, the future tense contributes to picture the reversal vividly: it is an unrealistic scenario, but the Old Men describe it in terms of possibility. Epirrhema B thus appears to adopt the basic structure of *adynata* and to exploit their argumentative power. Through the *adynaton* the idea of men giving in to women is represented as impossible, because it would result in

<sup>11</sup> Text and translation by GODLEY (1922).

<sup>12</sup> The opposite interpretation is supported by VILLALBA DE LA GÜIDA (2010), who suggests a close relationship between the *adynata* and the Land of Cockaigne/Golden Age motifs.

<sup>13</sup> Instances of *adynata* regarding human customs, norms or habits are collected by CANTER (1930, 39) and COCCHIARA (1963, 79).

<sup>14</sup> CANTER (1930, 34f.) records other instances of *adynata* displaying the same syntactic structure.

an absurd reversal of social and gender norms. Consequently, the Old Men's words in lines 672-81 gain persuasiveness and the call to restrain the women becomes imperative.

So far, we have recognized substantial similarities between *Lysistrata*'s epirrhema B and *adynata* in terms of formal features and argumentative implications. However, meaningful similarities may be also observed comparing the content of these lines from *Lysistrata* and other instances of *adynata*. As a matter of fact, we may see a certain recurrence of *adynata* to evoke subversions or disorders in gender norms. A telling example in this respect comes in the first stasimon of Euripides' *Medea*:

ΧΟΡΟΣ

ἄνω ποταμῶν ἱερῶν χωροῦσι παγαί,  
καὶ δίκαια καὶ πάντα πάλιν στρέφεται·  
ἀνδράσι μὲν δόλια βουλαί, θεῶν δ'  
οὐκέτι πίστις ἄραρεν.  
τὰν δ' ἐμὰν εὐκλειαν ἔχειν βιοτὰν στρέψουσι φᾶμαι·  
ἔρχεται τιμὰ γυναικείῳ γένει·  
οὐκέτι δυσκέλαδος φάμα γυναικῆς ἔξει.

μοῦσαι δὲ παλαιγενέων λήξουσ' αἰοιδῶν  
τὰν ἐμὰν ὑμνεῦσαι ἀπιστοσύναν.  
οὐ γὰρ ἐν ἀμετέρῃ γνώμῃ λύρας  
ᾠπασε θέσπιν αἰοιδὰν  
Φοῖβος ἀγήτωρ μελέων· ἐπεὶ ἀντάχησ' ἄν ὕμνον  
ἀρσένων γέννα. μακρὸς δ' αἰῶν ἔχει  
πολλὰ μὲν ἀμετέραν ἀνδρῶν τε μοῖραν εἶπειν. (410-31)

CHORUS Backward to their sources flow the streams of holy rivers, and the order of all things is reversed: men's thoughts have become deceitful and their oaths by the gods do not hold fast. The common talk will so alter that women's ways will enjoy good repute. Honor is coming to the female sex: no more will women be maligned by slanderous rumor.

The poetry of ancient bards will cease to hymn our faithlessness. Phoebus lord of song never endowed our minds with the glorious strains of the lyre. Else I could have sounded a hymn in reply to the male sex. Time in its long expanse can say many things of men's lot as well as of women's<sup>15</sup>.

This stasimon immediately follows *Medea*'s declaration of her intention to murder Jason, Creon and Creusa (364-409). The song opens with an *adynaton*, which links Jason's betrayal of oaths to the utter reversal of reality. This disruption includes both the realm of nature and the status of each gender: Jason's despicable behaviour will cause the rivers to flow upstream (410f.) and the conventionally negative judgment on women to be reversed (415f.). In the next stanza, this theme is expanded upon and transferred to a practical level. *Medea*'s chorus of Corinthian women know that misogynistic slanders

<sup>15</sup> Text and translation by KOVACS (1994).

have been spread by poets (421-23). They therefore wish – although they recognize it is an unrealistic desire (note the aorist + ἄν in line 427) – to take control of the exclusively male sphere of poetry, in order to establish a new poetic tradition, which would counter the existing one and be hostile to men (427f.).

This tragic stasimon overlaps with *Lysistrata*'s epirrhema B to a significant extent and it thus helps to improve our understanding of the latter. The two passages coincide in their fundamental logic and meanings: in both instances, a male action is related to a reversal in gender norms, conveyed through an *adynaton*<sup>16</sup>. In both passages, the reversal applies to concrete activities: the traditional prerogatives of men (war in *Lysistrata*, poetry in *Medea*) are now imagined as performed by women. These similarities to *Medea*'s first stasimon therefore confirm the presence of the *adynaton* in *Lysistrata*'s epirrhema B and suggest that this rhetorical device might have been intimately connected to the theme of gender reversal<sup>17</sup>.

More importantly for the present discussion, the passage from *Medea* shows that *adynata* often imply a sense of threat and they are used to describe reversals in highly negative terms. This results clearly from the tragic stasimon. Here, the *adynaton* is used to stress the reversal in the reputation enjoyed by women: this has always been bad but – the chorus wish – will become good. If we consider this passage within the play as a whole, the *adynaton* stands out as an ironic anticipation of the tragedy's gruesome finale. *Medea* will dramatically reject the conventional role attributed to women, killing her own children, and thus becoming the most infamous example of women's wickedness<sup>18</sup>. The comparison with the passage from *Medea* thus suggests that the adoption of an *adynaton* in *Lysistrata*'s parabolic scene orients the passage towards a definite direction. The *adynaton* equates the reversal of gender norms with the disruption of the natural order. By adopting this rhetorical pattern, the Old Men project the women's takeover into a ruinous dimension. Thus, the reversal pictured in epirrhema B is not meant to be only the playful image of a comic upside-down world. Rather, the scenario in which women invade male spheres and arrogate male activities to themselves turns out to be deeply unsettling<sup>19</sup>. The expressive implications of the *adynaton* therefore chime with the notion

<sup>16</sup> In the passage from *Medea*, the *adynaton* is certainly recognizable as it relies on the conventional image of rivers flowing upstream (410f.): cf. MASTRONARDE (2002, *ad loc.*), who notices that «the phrase ἄνω ποταμῶν was proverbial for reversals».

<sup>17</sup> More in general, we may observe that the theme of subversion in gender roles is frequently paired with poetic means and techniques which stress the deep unease entailed by this theme: see, in this respect, SEVIERI (2004), who examines the theme of reversal in Aesch. *Coeph.* 585-652 and its consequences on the language of the stasimon, rich in oxymorons and paradoxical expressions.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. MASTRONARDE (2002, 239f. *ad Med.* 410-45).

<sup>19</sup> This consideration finds a confirmation in Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*. Here, the reversal in gender roles is enacted fully and permanently: the government of women disrupts the city's natural order, as it establishes rules that are perceived as alien and paradoxical, such as the communal sharing of goods and women. The disastrous consequences of gynocracy are examined by TSOUNPRA (2019). The different



of threatening reversal – already evoked by the mention of Artemisia and the Amazons – and amplify it.

As mentioned above, the significance of the *adynaton* in *Lysistrata*'s epirrhema B emerges strongly when the frequency of this rhetorical arrangement is considered in comedy. Comic *adynata* are quite rare and the few occurrences encountered in Aristophanes' works invariably reflect the popular use of *adynata* as proverbs<sup>20</sup>. The presence of an extended and complex *adynaton* in *Lysistrata*'s epirrhema B is therefore certainly intentional and should be regarded as a powerful means to problematize women's action and status throughout the comedy. The parabolic scene is the most suitable place to do so, since it stands out in the play as a privileged moment. Here, female participation in public life is debated openly and both the Old Women and the Old Men offer their strongest arguments<sup>21</sup>. The theme of reversal and its disturbing nuances thus receive the appropriate emphasis and attention. In addition, the parabolic scene represents a connection with the second part of the play, which stages the consequences of the women's plan. The presence of the *adynaton* in the scene's closing lines may thus orient the audience towards this second part, and pique their expectations and interest in what will come next: will women eventually prevail and put the ruinous reversal in place?

*(Re)considering obscene humour*

The rhetorical analysis of epirrhema B reveals that this passage is richer in meaning and function than has so far been noticed in scholarly discussions. Rather than merely a piece of obscene humour, this passage appears as a relevant moment in the articulation and problematization of the theme of reversal in *Lysistrata*. However, the sexual allusions unmistakably detectable in epirrhema B are not in contrast to the interpretation provided so far. In fact, their relevance increases as they seem to perform a specific role within the

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treatments of the theme of reversal in *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae* is explored by SONNINO (2017, see esp. pp. 384-89). Regarding the negative nuances involved in the reversal of gender norms, see also FARIOLI 2001: 139-155, who observes the substantial difference of this motif compared to the Land of Cockaigne/Golden Age *topoi* in that «in entrambe le tipologie viene proposto un paradossale universo alternativo alla società contemporanea, ma, mentre gli *Schlaraffenländer* incarnano la realizzazione ingigantita dei desideri dell'uomo, gineocrazie e zoocrazie rappresentano uno stravolgimento dell'ordine naturale e si fondano sul rovesciamento delle strutture cardine della mentalità corrente» (142).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. CANTER 1930: 37 and, e.g., Aristoph. *Vesp.* 280 (“λίθον ἔψεις”, ἔλεγεν), *Pax* 1083 (οὔποτε ποιήσεις τὸν καρκίνον ὀρθὰ βαδίξειν) or *Lys.* 158 (τὸ τοῦ Φερεκράτους, κύνα δέρειν δεδαρμένην).

<sup>21</sup> In this respect, on the female side, lines 636-55 are especially noteworthy, since here the Old Women convincingly support the women's participation in public life on the basis of serious grounds, such as the women's involvement in civic cults and their contribution to the city as mothers of Athenian citizens and warriors. On the male side, the Old Men's argumentative effort is especially visible in the extensive deployment of historical paradigms, drawn from the most glorious moments of Athens' democratic past (such as the killing of the tyrants in lines 631-34, the Alcmaeonids' opposition against the tyrannical army in Leipsydrium in lines 667-70 or even the reference to Artemisia – and, by implication, to the Persian wars – contained in our passage).

unsettling picture conveyed by the *adynaton* and to balance the disturbing implications of the reversal.

As shortly pointed out at the beginning of this discussion, epirrhema B is highly involved in obscene humour, since all the activities in which women are said to want to engage – manual labour (673f.), sailing (674f.), horse-riding (676-79) – can also be read as allusions to sex<sup>22</sup>. The reference to handwork may be suggestive of masturbation, performed by women on men<sup>23</sup>. Similarly, the references to sailing and horse-riding are established metaphors for the sexual intercourse in comedy<sup>24</sup>. In particular, passages such as *Wasps* 500-502<sup>25</sup>, *Peace* 900-905<sup>26</sup> and *Lysistrata* 59f.<sup>27</sup> show that equestrian and nautical images are consistently used to indicate a specific mode for intercourse, called *keletizein* in Greek and which consists of women being on top during the intercourse<sup>28</sup>. In this respect, Henderson (1991, 164) observes that *keletizein* is frequently taken as a basis for jokes in comedy and this may be due to the «adventuresome and somewhat naughty» character attributed to this practice, usually associated with «shameless housewives or professional sexual partners». The references to this practice thus exploit the misogynistic cliché of women's eagerness for sex<sup>29</sup> and, in this way, the sense of initiative displayed by the women in *Lysistrata* is re-interpreted by the Old Men in terms of sex.

However, I would argue that obscene humour is not simply employed in epirrhema B as an easy way to elicit laughter. Rather, the Old Men's jokes appear to have a close connection with the major themes in the passage. Both the sexual practices alluded by the

<sup>22</sup> In addition, HENDERSON (1991, 114) suggests an obscene interpretation for lines 680f., considering ἀύχη (neck) as a euphemism for 'phallus' and ξύλον for 'vagina': these lines would therefore sound as «we should get hold of this here cock and put it into the cunts of all these women». However, PERUSINO (2020, 254f. *ad Lys.* 680f.) convincingly shows that this interpretation is untenable.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. HENDERSON (1987, 160 *ad Lys.* 672f. and 1991, 160 § 252), SOMMERSTEIN (1990, 191 *ad Lys.* 673), SONNINO (2018, 249 *ad Lys.* 672) does not mention the possible double-entendre in the formulation εἰ γὰρ ἐνδώσει ... χειρουργίας but observes the ambiguous meaning of the verb ἐνδίδωμι ('to lend, afford' but also 'to give in'): this implies that «alla paura di fornire un appiglio (λαβήν) alle donne, si sovrapponga quella di doversi presto arrendere a loro». PERUSINO (2020, 253 *ad Lys.* 272 and 273) notices the double-entendre in χειρουργία (273) and suggests that this may convey a similarly obscene meaning to λαβή (272) as well.

<sup>24</sup> It is worth noticing that equestrian and nautical metaphors conventionally indicate sex in serious poetry as well (see CRAIK 1990, 1-3) and maintain their sexual meanings in Latin literature (see ADAMS 1982, 89, 167).

<sup>25</sup> κάμ' εἴ γ' ἡ πόρνη χθὲς εἰσελθόντα τῆς μεσημβρίας, / ὅτι κελητίσαι 'κέλευον, ὄξυθυμηθεῖσά μοι / ἦρετ' εἰ τὴν Ἰππίου καθίσταμαι τυραννίδα.

<sup>26</sup> τρίτη δὲ μετὰ ταῦθ' ἵπποδρομίαν ἄξετε, / ἵνα δὴ κέλης κέλητα παρακελητιεῖ, / ἄρματα δ' ἐπ' ἀλλήλοισιν ἀνατετραμμένα / φουσῶντα καὶ πνέοντα προσκινήσεται. / ἕτεροι δὲ κείσονται γ' ἀπεψωλημένοι / περὶ ταῖσι καμπαῖς ἡνίοχοι πεπτωκότες.

<sup>27</sup> ἀλλ' ἐκεῖναί γ' οἶδ' ὅτι / ἐπὶ τῶν κελήτων διαβεβήκασ' ὄρθριαι.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. HENDERSON (1987, 160 *ad Lys.* 674-77), SOMMERSTEIN (1990, 191 *ad Lys.* 675), SONNINO (2018, 249f. *ad Lys.* 677-79), LANDFESTER (2019, 159 *ad Lys.* 677), PERUSINO (2020, 253f. *ad Lys.* 674-77). About *keletizein* see PRETAGOSTINI (1997).

<sup>29</sup> For this commonplace, and a comprehensive overview of women in Old and New Comedy, see FOLEY (2014, 269-74).

Old Men – masturbation and *keletizein* – clearly point at the theme of reversal, as they imply a dominant role of women in sex<sup>30</sup>. Obscene humour thus seems a relevant contribution to the theme of reversal, which – as demonstrated in the previous sections – emerges at various levels in epirrhema B. Sexual jokes therefore add one more nuance to this theme. Whereas the content and rhetorical structure of the passage casts a menacing and unsettling light on the reversal, the *keletizein*-based jokes project the reversal into the sphere of sex, where forms of subversion in gender roles are perfectly acceptable and, in fact, often desirable. At the same time, the emphasis laid on the alleged debauchery of women has the effect of confining women’s takeover to the private sphere of sex. The Old Men seemingly imply that the women’s pursuit of influence in politics is actually aimed to dominate the sexual intercourse. In this way, the women’s action in *Lysistrata* is downplayed: whereas they strive to take part in the public life, the play’s male personae – here represented by the Old Men – prove to regard them as exclusively interested and involved in sex. Ultimately, the obscene jokes uttered by the Old Men have the effect of balancing the ruinous nuances expressed through the *adynaton*: the gender reversal is seen in terms of sex and its disruptive potential is therefore cancelled.

*Conclusions: catastrophic reversals and comic normality in Lysistrata’s plot*

If we read *Lysistrata* further, we realize that the process enacted in epirrhema B – where a potentially destructive reversal is banalized through references to sex – is not exceptional or isolated. On the contrary, we find a new and more explicit occurrence of the same process shortly after in the play. In one of the episodic scenes that follow the parabolic debate, the Athenian women seemingly have had enough of abstaining from sex and make up excuses for abandoning the sexual strike (708-80). Lysistrata tries to bring them back to order by reading a prophecy:

ΛΥΣΙΣΤΡΑΤΗ

ἀλλ’ ὅποταν πτήξωσι χελιδόνες εἰς ἓνα χῶρον,  
τοὺς ἔποπας φεύγουσαι, ἀπόσχονται τε φαλήτων,  
παῦλα κακῶν ἔσται, τὰ δ’ ὑπέρτερα νέρτερα θήσει  
Ζεὺς ὑψιβρεμέτης—

ΓΥΝΗ Γ

ἐπάνω κατακείσόμεθ’ ἡμεῖς; (770-73)

<sup>30</sup> If the dominant role of women is obvious regarding *keletizein*, we may believe that masturbation could be perceived similarly, as an ‘assertive’ sexual practice: cf. *Lys.* 1119 (ἦν μὴ διδῶ τὴν χεῖρα, τῆς σάθης ἄγε) and *Eccl.* 1019f. (ταῖς πρεσβυτέραις γυναιξίν ἔστω τὸν νέον / ἔλκειν ἀνατεῖ λαβομένης τοῦ παττάλου).

## LYSISTRATA

Yea, when the swallows hole up in a single home, fleeing the hoopoes and leaving the phallus alone, then are their problems solved, and high-thundering Zeus shall reverse what's up and what's down—

THIRD WIFE You mean we'll be lying on top?

Once again, the success of women's endeavour is imagined in terms of reversal in the world's natural order (note particularly τὰ δ' ὑπέρτερα νέρτερα, 772), which, this time, is even divinely ordered. But the Third Wife interprets the utter reversal in terms of sex and, specifically, of *keletizein* (773)<sup>31</sup>. Thus, just like the Old Men in epirrhema B, she degrades the reversal through obscene humour. The exchange between destructive and sexual reversals which we have observed in lines 672-81 is reproduced once more here and the two passages coincide in precise details, such as the comic reference to *keletizein* and women's alleged debauchery. Regarding lines 770-73, we should observe that similar instances, in which political and military matters are banalized through references to sex, are a constant throughout *Lysistrata*. These instances often take the witty form of misunderstandings, just like in lines 770-73. Some especially amusing instances may be found in the prologue<sup>32</sup> and this humorous technique is extensively exploited in the play's finale, when the territories named in the peace negotiations are intended by the Athenian and the Spartan delegates as to indicate female body parts (1162-70)<sup>33</sup>. However, lines 672-81 and 770-73 are distinguished, in this collection, by the inclusion of obscene humour in the definite rhetorical framework of the *adynaton*. This combination creates a contrast between the *adynaton* – traditionally used to describe calamitous reversals in the world's natural order – and obscene jokes, which exploit the same concept of reversal and interpret it humorously, in terms of sex. A dialectic relationship is therefore established between the rhetorical structure and the humorous content, and this appears to be characteristic of the passages examined here.

We may therefore wonder whether this dialectic has a role within the play and whether it has a privileged place in the second part of the drama, where both the explicit emergences of lines 672-81 and 770-73 are located. To answer these questions, we should consider the play's finale. As the plot moves towards the end, the women achieve their goal (i.e. to stop the war) and spontaneously abandon public life to resume their roles of

<sup>31</sup> See SONNINO (2018, 258 *ad Lys.* 773).

<sup>32</sup> Lines 21-25 (KA. τί δ' ἐστίν, ὃ φίλη Λυσιστράτη, / ἐφ' ὃ τι ποθ' ἡμᾶς τὰς γυναῖκας ξυγκαλεῖς; / τί τὸ πρᾶγμα; πηλίκον τι; ΛΥ. μέγα. KA. μῶν καὶ παχύ; / ΛΥ. νῆ τὸν Δία καὶ παχύ. KA. κᾶτα πῶς οὐχ ἤκομεν; / ΛΥ. οὐχ οὗτος ὁ τρόπος· ...) and 108-10 (KA. ἐξ οὗ γὰρ ἡμᾶς προὔδοσαν Μιλήσιοι, / οὐκ εἶδον οὐδ' ὄλισβον ὀκτωδάκτυλον, / ὅς ἦν ἂν ἡμῖν σκυτίνη ἴκιουρία).

<sup>33</sup> ΛΑ. ΠΡ. ἀμές γὰρ λῶμες, αἶ τις ἀμῖν τῶγκυκλον / λῆ τοῦτ' ἀποδόμεν. ΛΥ. ποῖον, ὃ τᾶν; ΛΑ. ΠΡ. τὰν Πύλον, / τᾶσπερ πάλαι δεόμεθα καὶ βλμᾶδδομες. / ΑΘ. ΠΡ. μὰ τὸν Ποσειδῶ τοῦτο μὲν γ' οὐ δράσετε. / ΛΥ. ἄφετ', ὄγαθ', αὐτοῖς. ΑΘ. ΠΡ. κᾶτα τίνα κινήσομεν; / ΛΥ. ἕτερόν γ' ἀπαιτεῖτ' ἀντὶ τοῦτου χωρίον. / ΑΘ. ΠΡ. τὸ δεῖνα τοῖνυν, παράδοθ' ἡμῖν τουτονὶ / πρῶτιστα τὸν Ἐχινούντα καὶ τὸν Μηλιᾶ / κόλπον τὸν ὀπισθεν καὶ τὰ Μεγαρικά σκέλη.

wives and mothers within the private sphere (1082-1086, 1274-76). The reversal is thus over: peace is restored, and the city comes back to normality. This tension between reversal and normality is what ultimately sustains the plot in *Lysistrata*, until its final scenes. From this perspective, lines 672-81 and 770-73 are important moments in the play's narrative and thematic development. They help to define and articulate the theme of reversal, as they employ the pattern of *adynata* to represent the women's takeover as deeply unsettling and threatening. At the same time, the sexual jokes contained in these lines serve to balance the disturbing nuances entailed by the *adynaton* and constitute an anticipation of the play's finale, when the reversal will be eventually avoided, and women will take back their roles within the private sphere of sex.

Regarding *Lysistrata*'s epirrhema B – and, complementarily, lines 770-73 – we may therefore conclude that this passage performs a precise narrative function, which is the result of a complex combination of content, rhetoric and humour. In addition, from this discussion, epirrhema B stands out as a good example of the variety of functions attributed to jokes in comic texts: these are not always intended *exclusively* to provoke laughter but may be used as powerful means to create meaning and orient the audience's understanding of the play.

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