

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING COMEDIC

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The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde and *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes are not commonly compared works. The first centers around a misunderstood identity that unfolds unfortunately, while *Lysistrata* focuses on women abstaining from sex in order to end a war. Although the plays seem starkly differently, because both plays are comedies, they have similar plot structures.

According to an article by G.M. Sifakis, there are eight central “functions”, or structural elements to Old Comedy plays: the villain, lack, or misfortune; the decision to counteract misfortune; service or help of a person, typically supernatural; transference; obstacles; a moment of persuasion; the villain or misfortune “liquidated”; and triumph (Sifakis 129-132). All eight of these elements are evident not only in *Lysistrata*, but in *The Importance of Being Earnest* as well. Whether this is intentional or not, it demonstrates that Old Comedy is the root for all comedic works that follow.

The villain, lack, or misfortune are “Viewed from the suffers point of view, are conditions, and their causes cannot always be referred to specific villainous actions” (Sifakis 129). The villain does not have to be a Batman or Spiderman villain, but anyone who stands in the way of the protagonists and their desire. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the villain is Lady Bracknell. After telling Jack that Gwendolyn will not be marrying him, he describes her as, “Perfectly unbearable. Never met such a Gorgon...I don’t really know what a Gorgon is like, but I am quite sure that Lady Bracknell is one” (Wilde 699). Bracknell does not approve of Jack’s proposal to Gwendolyn because he does not know who his parents are because he was left in a handbag in the cloak room of a train station.

In *Lysistrata*, the misfortune is the war between Sparta and Athens. The war has left the two towns ravaged. She assembles a group of Spartan and Athenian women, and then asks if they miss their husbands. When they respond yes, she says, “Would you be willing then, if I thought out a scheme, to join with me to end the war?” (Aristophanes 114). The women miss their husbands, for various reasons, and the war is the reason why.

These events make the reader laugh because, “We see the in the folly of others a reflection of our own” (Farce 120). The reader can laugh at the absurdity of Lady Bracknell’s reasoning, knowing that there is validity behind her expecting Jack to know who his parents are. It can also observe how simple the solution of a sex strike is, but how again, there is validity in the statement. This keeps the reader wondering how the events will unravel.

After a villain is introduced, the decision or counterplan follows (Sifakis 129). The counterplan in Wilde’s play seems simple: Gwendolyn will come visit Jack at his country house so that they can discuss what will happen next, because although they may never be married, and even if she is married off to someone else, she will still love him, and he should not give up. When Jack gives her address, Algernon takes this opportunity to sneak over to his house and meet his lovely ward, Cecily Cardew, and convinces her that he is Ernest, which is important because “The entire play begins with an elaborate joke about names that implicitly calls into question the importance of aristocratic identity” (Farce 119). The decision is what sends the plot into action.

The decision in *Lysistrata* is explicitly stated, not long after the misfortune is announced. After all the women agree they miss their husbands, Lysistrata says, “I may now divulge my plan. Women of Greece! – if we intend to force the men to make a peace, we must abstain...well then, we must abstain utterly from the prick” (Aristophanes 114). Lysistrata’s idea of a sex strike

to end the war is itself already comedic, but also humorous for the time because, “Given Athens’s highly unfavorable military situation in 411, no one could have expected Sparta to open negotiations” (Heath 6). The idea of sex being able to end a war that appeared to have no end steers the comedy onto the next stages.

In comedies, things often do not go as planned, which is why the third function is a helper. The helper in Greek stories was often mystical or godly, but “This function is absent in *Vesp.* [*The Wasps*], *Lys.* [*Lysistrata*], and *Eccl.* [*Ecclesiazusae*], while a purely human helper, without any extraordinary power...steps in to take up the role of the seeker-hero” (Sifakis 130). The helper does not need to be magical, but instead provide aid in some way to the characters.

Merriman, the servant of Jack’s, is the literal and literary helper in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Merriman helps Algernon bring his belongings in, helps him get settle, and does not do as Jack instructed, but instead as Algernon instructs. He helps the plot of the story by letting Algernon stay at the country home. Algernon then flirts with Cecily, telling her his name is Ernest, and the plot continues to expand, creating comedic effect. He also serves Cecily and Gwendolyn their tea in the scene after they both believe they are engaged to Ernest.

In *Lysistrata*, the helper is a group of market women in the Acropolis. While Lysistrata and her group of women are attempting their sex strike, the commissioner keeps threatening to lock them away. A group of women, “Carrying baskets of vegetables, spindles, etc., emerges. There is a volley of vegetables” (Aristophanes 118). With the aid of these “market women”, Lysistrata’s squad is able to enter the Acropolis and see the men. The helpers aids the comedic elements by, “Making another person look funny is an act of aggression, but is not a cruel act if it enables us to laugh at the situation we put him in, rather than the person himself” (Farge 129).

The women and Merriman themselves are not funny, but put into the situations, they enable us to laugh at this fortune that unravels.

In the fourth concept of transference the characters, “Move from one place to another, cover long distances, or even be transferred to a different world” (Sifakis 130). In comedy, characters are not bound by space and time, are free to travel wherever they wish. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, they begin in town, then travel to Jack’s country home. There they go from the garden, to the “morning room”, back again back to the garden, inside the house, and end up in the garden. The constant back and forth motion of the characters help to break down stability, and add spontaneity to the comedy, helping to make it comedic and chaotic for those who observe.

The same is true for the characters in *Lysistrata*. The women devise their plan for peace on a random street in Athens, then make their way to the Acropolis to address the men. Women also come from Sparta, such as Lamipto, to help end the war. The women do not have any influence on the men outside of town since they are all away fighting. Minutes after being in the Acropolis, Cinesias, husband of Myrrhina, walks by and demands that his wife have sex with him, creating the next section: obstacles.

Obstacles are essential to comedies because, “No interesting tale of any kind has ever been known to be without a fight or without difficulties and obstacles, which have to be faced and overcome before matters are allowed to rest” (Sifakis 130). A comedy does not end on a cliff hanger, but ties everything up in a neat little bow. In *Lysistrata*, Myrrhina’s desire to sleep with Cinesias is so great that she is not sure she can overcome it. Cinesias says that he will bear the blame if she breaks the oath, to which Myrrhina responds, “Wait here, and I’ll go get a cot for

us” (Aristophanes 123). The rest of the scene is her constantly running back and forth, denying sleeping with him until he says he will advocate for peace.

Gwendolyn and Cecily discovering that Jack and Algernon are not really named Ernest creates the obstacle in Wilde’s work. Gwendolyn describes the action as, “a gross deception” (Wilde 708). She and Cecily then go into the house and refuse to talk to the men for the rest of the night. The marriage at this point seems unlikely for either couple, and the men must figure out a way to make the women come back to them.

The opposition is comical because, “In all comedy we are able to laugh at the most intense emotions because, although we recognize them, we do not share them” (Farge 135). Most readers have probably never had to abstained from sex to save nations, or had to figure out to get women to talk them because they told them their name was Ernest when it was not. The feeling of indulging in pleasures and trying to appease someone that you have previously made mad are relatable situation the readers can recognize and sympathize with.

The obstacles are reconciled through persuasion or debate. This function is “The last stage in the efforts to bring about the fulfillment of the plan” (Sifikas 131). The protagonists, or some representative of the protagonists, tries to achieve their initial plan by discussing it with another party. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the persuasion follows immediately after the obstacles unfolds. Algernon convinces Cecily that he only lied to her, “In order that I might have an opportunity of meeting you” (Wilde 709), and Jack says something similar. They tell the women that they are going to be christened that afternoon, so their names will be Ernest like the women desire, so all is forgiven.

Lysistrata is the representative for the women. She meets with a Spartan and an Athenian ambassador. She convinces them to talk about achieving peace. Sparta agrees to give Athens the

gulf of Malia for the bay of Pylos. Lysistrata then sends the ambassadors off to tell their allies, promising when they get back, “Women will entertain you out of your supplies” (Aristophanes 126). The reader laughs at the debate because it is, “A politically subversive discourse that could only exist in the safe environment of farce” (Lalonde 668). These are conditions and terms that would not exist in the real world, but can be used in comedy to aid the plot and create humor.

After the debate successfully steers the plot, the villain or misfortune is liquidated, which is “a distinct stage in the development of the story” (Sifakis 131). This function is for the villain to show a redeeming quality, or to be reformed. Lady Bracknell discovers that Jack is her nephew, Algernon’s brother, who was left in a train station many years ago. This changes her mind about the marriage of Algernon and Gwendolyn, allowing the marriage to proceed since he managed to discover his parents.

The war ending is the liquidation of the misfortune in *Lysistrata*. Spartan men sing about the end of the war saying, “May we stop ouah villainous wahly foxy stealth” (Aristophanes 128). The women successful persuaded the men to stop the fighting, restoring peace to the society, and destroying the misfortune that waged the cities. This is comedic because the plays, “Operates on the level of a social critique – it’s subjects the social institutions of its milieu to ridicule but stops short of advocating specific reforms” (Lalonde 666). It comments the status of society without implementing a plan, allowing the audience to enjoy the satirical appeal of the works.

The end of war is directly linked to Sifakis’ final function of comedy: triumph. Lysistrata and the band of women were successful in establish peace and ending this war. This resulted in the women having their husbands back, and being able to enjoy each other’s company again. In her last speech, Lysistrata tells the people, “Let your husband stand beside his wife, and let each

wife stand by her husband” (Aristophanes 128). She encourages all the women to go back to their men and enjoy the peace they have successfully won.

The happy ending for Jack, Algernon, Cecily, and Gwendolyn is they all get to be married, achieving their original goal. Lady Bracknell approves Algernon’s marriage when she finds out Cecily is worth “About a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in Funds” (Wilde 710). Gwendolyn agrees to marry Jack when he realized his name is Ernest, since he was the first born of General Ernest, his name was Gwendolyn’s only rejection. Lady Bracknell could not prevent the marriage since Jack (now Ernest) overcame the only objection she had.

Although the end is happy, “The triviality of the play should be taken as a signal that beneath the most trivial matters, in the heart of a self-avowed trivial play, there is something serious lurking” (Lalonde 665). The play is humorous and leaves the audience feeling happy, but should also make the audience wonder if there is something deeper to take from it. Although the two plays are about completely different subjects and stem from vastly different time eras, they share the same structural plot. These functions create the wittiness and jesting which has made comedies enjoyable for readers for centuries.

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