Sex and politics. These two concepts share a unique history. Two of the earliest professions dealt with these subjects; both are considered dirty words and both are prevalent topics in popular culture as well as in the entertainment business. In many ways, sex and politics are related topics in that their paths cross frequently, and they have been nearly inseparable throughout history. In 411 B.C.E., for example, the Athenian comedy writer Aristophanes wrote and presented the play *Lysistrata* at the winter Lenaea festival. In *Lysistrata* the women of Greece, led by one Athenian woman after whom the play is named, decide to withhold sexual attention from their husbands in order to force their men to end a long war in which Athens had been consumed for many years. While this topic, especially since it is written as a comedy, may not seem to have anything to do with concurrent internal Athenian politics, the surrogate roles in which Aristophanes places the women in his play emphasize women’s impact on the family and on male companionship as a foundation of *demos* (the people) and an antidote to the emerging oligarchy of Athens.

Comedies were a popular theatric medium and were often laden with political messages and commentary regarding current affairs. For example, Plato believed that Socrates’ trial and condemnation were partially the result of portrayals of him and his actions in comedies such as Aristophanes’ *The Clouds*.¹ As historian Sommerstein notes, “quite generally, comedy (at least Old Comedy) held everyone and everything up to ridicule – and in particular, philosophers and

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philosophy.” Governmental philosophy, therefore, would have been a common topic making the Athenian oligarchy and current political climate a perfect topic for critique.

Aristophanes was born around 447 B.C.E., died roughly between 386 and 380 B.C.E, and was an active comedy writer from 427-386 B.C.E. Though we know little about his life, it seems evident that he was friends with both Socrates and Plato; additionally, we know that his highly political comedies resulted in him being sued and appearing in court on two separate occasions “for his outspoken attacks on the prominent politician Cleon.” Essential to the thesis of this paper is the knowledge that he viewed Cleon as having taken advantage of the demos’ gullibility by professing love for the people and an intention to protect and champion the interests of the demos in order to gain political power and support. As this limited information about Aristophanes indicates, he was clearly a politically-minded man and was an active critic of current political affairs. Aristophanes’ critical purpose in *Lysistrata* is best evidenced by the fact that it debuted in Athens in 411 B.C.E. By this time, Athens had been involved in the Peloponnesian War with Sparta for twenty years. To further add to the political turmoil, in 411 B.C.E. the Athens assembly “decided by a single show of hands to give autocratic power to a body of Four Hundred.” This was a drastic change for Athenian society from the democracy that had generally been in place since 510 B.C.E.; however, as ancient historian R. K. Sinclair notes, “the concept of the sovereignty of the demos (or the sovereignty of the majority)

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2 Ibid., 10.
continued to be regarded as fundamental to democracy in the fifth century,“\(^9\) especially with the masses. *Lysistrata* champions the will of the demos over that of a select few.

*Lysistrata* portrays a struggle between a group of women, metaphorically representing the household, against the elderly men who control the city. The play starts with Lysistrata calling a meeting of women from the different *poleis* (Greek city-states) and having them bind themselves together by oath against sexual relations with their husbands in order to force the men to end the long and destructive war. In order to present a united front, the women occupy the Acropolis and close the area off from the men by gate, both to protect themselves from temptation as well as to gain control of the treasury. Their occupation of the Acropolis meets with threats of violence from the old men of the city who try to have the women arrested, but the women succeed in maintaining their hold on the area. Initially the women have weak will power and continually make up excuses to sneak home to their husbands. However, after the oracle predicts that the women will have success if they stand united, the women come together with a true strength of purpose and succeed in withholding their favors such that the men desperately give up and sue for peace with Sparta.

“Why, [Greece’s] salvation hangs on a poor thread then!”

First, it is important to note why Aristophanes chose to use women, a group of citizens normally confined to the private sphere and constantly dominated by men, as representations of the will of the populous. The answer lies in the purpose of the play: political criticism. Aristophanes chose to use women as the main characters driving the plot because women and the *oikos* (household) were safe spheres from which to critique the way demos had become oligarchic.

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The women in *Lysistrata* operate as representations of oikos and the private sphere because they were not usually part of the public realm. Women were usually represented in public by their male counterparts – single women by their fathers or brothers and married women by their husbands or sons. Aristophanes’s decision to make women the main subjects of his play, especially when the topic is a public issue (war), indicates that these women represent an institution vital to the demos – the oikos. The oikos was vital to Athenian society because, as classicist Robert J. Littman explains, “the oikos was also the basic unit of Athenian society in social, domestic and economic spheres. It existed as the primary residential unit and functioned as the unit which owned and held the land.” Therefore, since politics are concerned with money and money was connected to the individual oikoi, politics primarily affected and therefore should have been concerned with the oikos. In fact, of the three philosophical dichotomies, the superiority of a husband over his wife, as Aristotle argued, was the only essentially political relationship inside the oikos because it involved the rule of one citizen over another.

*Lysistrata* shifts away from societal norm by having upper class married women appear in an active public role. Such women would have been secluded from society in real life and would not have been out in the public as they are shown in the play. Historian Sarah B. Pomeroy points out that “Aristophanes was a firm believer in the nuclear family.” Thus, such a shift from societal norms indicates that his choice of representation is important to his message. This deviation is recognizable by the way in which Aristophanes initially describes the women.

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David Schaps presents, as discussed by Aristotle, three dichotomies: that of beast versus man, man versus woman, and citizen versus barbarian.
13 Pomeroy, 95.
14 Ibid., 114.
characters as weak and even unworthy. In the beginning of the play, when Lysistrata declares that their congregation of women will save the whole of Greece, her fellow Athenian, Cleonicé, exclaims, “Why, its salvation hangs on a poor thread then!”\(^\text{15}\) Aristophanes has the women initially acknowledge themselves as lazy, alcoholic, and constantly desiring sexual attention; thus, the fact that they are main characters is ridiculous, hence funny and the plot device for a comedy is established. Aristophanes has the characters note often how strange and implausible the events taking place are, because otherwise the play and with it the author’s critique would not have been easily received by the audience.

Since Aristophanes gives the women in the play powers and capabilities that they do not actually possess in life, the political message behind the plot seems less dangerous. For example, when the chorus of old men initially threatens violence against the women for occupying the Acropolis, the chorus of women offers to meet such threats with equal force, which of course was not likely.\(^\text{16}\) Such portrayals of threats of violence between two groups of citizens would not have been viewed as harmless had one of the groups not consisted solely of women. This scene is actually viewed as comical because the men are unable to properly re-exert their control over the women, who are not supposed to be violent by nature. Aristophanes must use women to drive the plot against the male-run government because if he had chosen to portray men doing the same thing it might be understood as a call to arms rather than the ideological critique he intended.

Aristophaness’ decision to use women as main plot instigators is key because even in the somewhat powerful position they assume, they are still not a direct or violent threat to the government as men would be. Even though the women in the play attempt to take over the


\(^{16}\) Ibid., 825.
treasury and distribute the funds themselves, and threaten to defend their cause with violence, as women they are able to take a more passively resistant path to inspire social change than would be possible for men. For example, the women are able to use essentially non-violent methods of protest such as refusing to willingly engage in sex with their husbands and collectively occupying the Acropolis because such methods fit with women’s depiction as innately non-violent. It would have been nearly impossible for Aristophanes to portray men using such tactics because men were in fact violent and were engaged in battle frequently, especially at the time the play was written when the Peloponnesian War had been raging on for two consecutive decades. Such non-violent methods of protest were essential to the safe deliverance of the play’s message so that the current Athenian government did not view the play as a threat, something that could land Aristophanes in trouble yet again.

“Yes, we’re going to save you, whether you like it or not.”

Since the women are representative of the oikos or the public sphere, it is important to investigate the part in which the women in the play occupy in society overall. Aristophanes suggests that demos, which had been corrupted by oligarchy, could potentially be improved and rectified by the talents and values of the oikos, such as community, productivity, and negotiation. The women portrayed in Lysistrata represent the oikos as an institution in contrast to, as well as within, the demos. Aristophanes’ plot only works because the women are all wives and therefore institutionalized female companions of their husbands; otherwise, there could be no societal uprising over the withholding of sexual access. Because the oikoi were the basic units of Athenian society, any non-marital physical relationships would not take place within society but instead would be extra-societal. This is evidenced by the fact that in Athenian society
illegitimate children were marginal members of society and were formally excluded from the privileges associated with oikos and polis, or the city.¹⁷

Women’s influence and roles within the demos are shown clearly when the husband of one Athenian women occupying the Acropolis, Myrrhiné, comes to attempt to persuade her to lie with him. She eventually comes out of the gated Acropolis because he brings their child to see her; however, even after she finally comes out she focuses solely on the child and ignores her husband.¹⁸ Myrrhiné’s role as mother is communal because, by raising a child, she is contributing to the whole of society. However, her role as sexual companion to her husband is not communal because the act has no benefit for the whole, as she has already produced a child. This shows that women were essential members of both the oikos and the demos and therefore were still legitimate representations of the populous. Sex is a central issue of family life being the path by which to bring future Athenians into this world. Therefore, women even though they were not public figures did exert power through their private and sexual roles within the polis. Since they do contribute to the state, they argue that they have an ability to occupy the Acropolis and to try and change the actions of the state, even though they do not have public roles within the state. The women assert that not only will they end the war but they will also unite the people. As Lysistrata tells the magistrate, “Yes, we’re going to save you, whether you like it or not.”¹⁹ By refusing their husbands, the women are working towards a larger goal for the overall good of the polis.

Finally, the women make a pact to avoid willing sexual relations with their husbands, meaning that their say does hold some sway with their spouses. The women’s declaration to

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¹⁸ Aristophanes, 842.
¹⁹ Ibid., 829.
abstain from willing intercourse is interesting because certainly the men could have forced themselves upon their wives if they had so wanted. Not only are men generally stronger than women, but Athenian husbands were legally permitted to relations with their wives, willing or not. In fact, according to Pomeroy, husbands were required to have relations at least three times a month with their spouses if the women were either heiresses or simply good wives.\footnote{Pomeroy, 87.} Lysistrata convinces the other women that no man would want to force sex on his wife because “there’s no satisfaction for a man, unless the woman shares it.”\footnote{Aristophanes, 816.} Not only is Lysistrata persuading these women to give up something they desire, something that is rare in war time with the men often away, she is also convincing them that it is worth the risk of physical harm in order to preserve the demos overall. Additionally, Lysistrata’s statement indicates that women’s feelings may have held more weight over men’s considerations than the strict social hierarchy reveals. Therefore, sex was not simply about power, because otherwise the women’s plot would not have worked and peace would not have been achieved. Again, Aristophanes shows that the desire of the minority should not rightfully trump that of the majority.

Productivity was another value of the oikos that Aristophanes suggested could rectify the increasingly oligarchic state of the demos. As the base unit for the community and the economic sphere, the oikos was a unit of productivity. As landholders, it would have been the individual oikoi that provided food for the soldiers while they were at war and taxes for public works. Additionally, since the demos was completely made up of individuals from the oikos, all of the state’s warriors and manpower also came from the private sphere; yet the oligarchy controlled how all of these resources were used without consulting members from each oikos. In fact,
according to historian A. Zimmerman, “the gradual growth of the material resources and powers of the Greek States led to both the Persian and the Peloponnesian Wars.\textsuperscript{22}

Within the oikos, women often were responsible for overseeing and performing duties regarding the maintenance of the household in ways more varied than cleaning. This is shown in \textit{Lysistrata} when the women inform the chorus of elders that they will be taking control of the treasury because the men have recently made numerous stupid decisions that have negatively affected the majority. Not only do the women have good reason for taking over the treasury, but they also have the credentials to collect, maintain, and distribute the funds. The magistrate is wholly surprised when he hears that the women plan to administer the treasury. Lysistrata exclaims, “What is there in that to surprise you? Do we not administer the budget of household expenses?”\textsuperscript{23} This episode is important because it is an implicit critique of the oligarchy and lays the groundwork for Aristophanes’ suggestion that productivity should determine power. In a tale as old as time, Aristophanes argues that the rich men at the top are not as productive and do not give as much to the state as do the oikoi and therefore should not be able to determine the fate of the demos. For example, Aristophanes illustrates that due to women’s positions as both child-bearers and child-rearers they suffer the heaviest sacrifices in times of war. As Lysistrata insists to the magistrate, the women pay taxes to the state in the form of husbands and sons and “are left to languish far from [their] husbands who are all with the army.”\textsuperscript{24} Whereas the “old doddering grey beards,”\textsuperscript{25} who are extremely warlike and must be cured, pay nothing and instead act as a drain on resources. This is a direct critique of the oligarchy that has used up all of the resources to pursue wars that are destructive for the people and are no longer supported by the demos.

\textsuperscript{22} A. Zimmerman, \textit{Greek Common-Wealth} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), 85.
\textsuperscript{23} Aristophanes, 828.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 833.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 822.
Lysistrata portrays this further when, scolding the magistrate, she says, “All the long time the war has lasted, we have endured in modest silence all you men did; you never allowed us to open our lips.” To compound the burdens of the oikos, the women note that not only do they pay taxes to the state in the form of men, but they also are taxed in wasted youth and beauty. Wives’ physical attributes are wasted away while their men are at war. Young girls also suffer because when they come of age, the men are away and, when the men finally return, the girls are too old and are passed up in preference for younger ladies. If only the most productive members of society were in control, resources of the community would be spent in wiser ways and concern for the majority would prevail.

In addition to community and productivity, the climax illustrates the final talent of oikos, which actually does end up rectifying the problem afflicting demos, negotiation. One of the most telling aspects of Aristophanes’s Lysistrata is the way it ends. The story wraps up, quite comically, with the women succeeding in making the men lustful enough that they agree to start peace negotiations. In a dramatic change of heart, the old men and the magistrate acknowledge that the women and Lysistrata in particular are essential to peace negotiations with Sparta and allow the women to host the Spartan diplomats who come to Athens. As the basic societal, domestic, and economic unit, the oikos would have been well acquainted with the values and methods of negotiation. In the market bartering for food, acquiring loans for business ventures, and planning societal events, all would have required a great deal of compromise in order to assure both parties were satisfied with the terms of the agreement as well as its outcome. On the other hand, individual poleis, or politicians, were more accustomed to ultimatums than they were to diplomatic embassies or ambassadors. Such non-violent diplomatic approaches were usually seen as a method of last resort to be used right before fighting broke out since the poleis did not

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26 Ibid., 830.
have a system for maintaining embassies or ambassadors similar to that of modern countries.27 According to historian J. E. Lendon, the nature of Greek foreign relations, like so many other inter-polis institutions, was innately competitive.28 This would obviously have been an issue in regards to the use and effectiveness of diplomatic ambassadors. Aristophanes provides evidence of negotiation’s position in the private sphere when he has Lysistrata state, “When we are winding thread, and it is tangled, we pass the spool across and through the skein, now this way, now that way; even so, to finish off the war, we shall send embassies hither and thither and everywhere, to disentangle matters.”29 This suggests that the private sphere would actually have been much better at creating peace settlements than would the public ruling group because the oikoi were better able to weigh the gains and losses of peace and war since they were the main suppliers of resources.

During negotiations within the play, the men realize it will be difficult to come to an agreement so they go against societal norms; the magistrate says, “Better call Lysistrata, then; she is the only person who will bring us to terms.”30 This is a major turning point because the men (representing demos and the public sphere) are conceding that the women (representing oikos and the private sphere) have both the ability and the right to be at the forefront of decision-making within the polis. The end of oligarchy and the reemergence of democracy is further suggested after the peace meeting adjourns when the chorus of old men hail Lysistrata for her success in bringing together Sparta and Athens in peace. Lysistrata is now described as a person rather than merely a woman, making her and the oikos she embodies a political equal.

29 Aristophanes, 832.
30 Ibid., 853.
“You did not know the ardor that fills the bosom of free-born dames!”

Aristophanes’s criticism of the oligarchy is made markedly more clear if we view the whole demos in terms of an individual oikos, the men having a superior ruling authority and the women being the inferior authority but still majority interest. With sexual desire representing political will, the women disrupt private life by withholding one of the private sphere’s most important exchanges in order to then influence the public domain. *Lysistrata* suggests that individuals and private oikoi should passively resist the established government in order to instigate political change within the demos. The women are incensed over the men’s bad decisions and feel that they are forced by necessity to take action. The latest bad political decision of the men which Aristophanes is referencing seems to be Athens’ failed offensive called the Sicilian Expedition, which had begun in 415 before ending in disaster in 412 B.C.E. Aristophanes was in fact using this literary work to deliver a scathing political critique of the Sicilian Expedition and other foreign policy mistakes in a way that would be safe for him. Throughout *Lysistrata* Aristophanes is mixes these small political critiques while at the same time making the larger point of problems in Athenian society between the private and public spheres, between oikos and demos, between women and men, and between the common majority and the elite ruling minority. Further evidence of this representative problem is when the chorus of old men, representing the oligarchy, express fear that the women have been coaxed by the Spartans to try and establish a new tyranny like that of Hippias. Here Aristophanes is using irony at its best for, even though the *demos* as a whole voted to initiate the rule of the Four Hundred, in voting to implement the oligarchy in 411 B.C.E., historian Cosmo Rodewald states, the people were “influenced partly by false promises, partly by terrorism organized by a group of

32 Aristophanes, 834.
conspirators.”

Thus, in *Lysistrata* the oligarchy is accusing the women of doing what they themselves had done to establish the oligarchy and the rule of the 400. However, Aristophanes allows the women to triumph. When the chorus of old men and the magistrate threaten the females with violence upon learning of the women’s peace plan, the women overcome their objections with taunts. “Ah, ha! so you thought you had only to do with a set of slave-women! you did not know the ardor that fills the bosom of free-born dames.” The men’s threats wind up lacking the same force of determination as possessed by the women.

Aristophanes understands that such a criticism is difficult for people caught in a political whirlwind to hear and so he addresses the difficulties of change by asserting both the rightness of their goal and the certainty of their success throughout the length of the play. During most of the play, the women are “naughty” and badly “want laying,” making up excuses to go home and then come back; however, Lysistrata understands their aim and encourages them to remain strong and united. This is a call to the audience to similarly stay united in the goal they must achieve of overcoming the oligarchy and returning to a true demos. The sentiment is enhanced when the oracle promises the women success as long as they stand united, which they do.

The oracle’s blessing further encourages the audience in their devotion to the cause, offers hope that the gods are on their side, and suggests that victory is possible. While this may seem too subtle to have had an effect on the crowd, it is important because it grounds Aristophanes’ comedy in reality and assures the crowd that while the surface plot may be ridiculous, the message behind the plot is not only plausible but is achievable.

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33 Rodewald, 18.
34 Aristophanes, 827.
35 Ibid., 836.
36 Ibid., 839.
Aristophanes uses *Lysistrata*’s peaceful ending as well as complex representations to critique the newly implemented Athenian oligarchy. The emergence of the oligarchy cannot be attributed solely to politicians when the reasons behind the revolution lay in the long, drawn out nature of the war.\(^{37}\) Therefore, by ending the war in *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes was also allowing for the re-founding of democracy because there was no longer a force making the oligarchy necessary. Furthermore, because flexibility is one of democracy’s biggest strengths, it is in democracy’s best interest to increase space for criticism.\(^{38}\) The fact of Aristophanes persistent if comedic criticism is a powerful act of democracy against an encroaching tyranny.

Despite Aristophanes pointed criticism of the oligarchic trend in Athenian democracy during the time he wrote *Lysistrata*, he had been critical of the imperfect democracy of Athens in many prior plays. He even seemed to suggest that some kind of elite rule might be a better solution for Athens than erratic democracy. However, even though he both heavily criticized the practical application of democracy and seemed to call for the implementation of a form of elite rule, he suggested that the older democratic system was still preferable. After all, as Sommerstein points out, “[Aristophanes] never goes so far as to express himself in favour of oligarchy, and it would be an exaggeration to describe him as anti-democratic; but he was certainly distrustful of the way the system was currently working.”\(^{39}\) This emphasizes that Aristophanes’ criticism of democracy in his prior plays was aimed at the errant workings of the Athenian democratic system due to the “fickleness and gullibility of the sovereign people”\(^{40}\) which led to Athens’ involvement in both the Peloponnesian War and the failed Sicilian

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\(^{37}\) Connor, 196.


\(^{40}\) Ibid., 15.
Expedition. Since democracy’s implementation in Athens, there had always been criticism of the concept and of the power it gave to the masses. On the other hand, *Lysistrata* portrays Aristophanes’ ideological opposition to oligarchy. In ancient Athens, where the ends were more politically important than the means that lead to them, it is understandable that Aristophanes would suggest returning to a governing system that he had previously criticized.

The women in *Lysistrata* are eventually successful in their attempt to bring an end to the war, and therefore an end to the oligarchy. The oikos succeeds in influencing the oligarchy to bow to its political wishes. Tellingly, the goddess Peace appears and takes the form of a beautiful naked girl. This indicates that not only were the women responsible for bringing about the peace settlement, but peace itself is an embodiment of the women and thus of oikos. In order to bring the two poleis to terms, Lysistrata scolds both Athens and Sparta for fighting and forgetting the fraternity they have shared in domestic issues of the past. Lysistrata’s peace talks take a decidedly different turn than what happened in reality. After the disastrous Sicilian Expedition, Cleon, the leader of the oligarchic 400, made such extreme demands at the start of peace negotiations with the Spartans that they walked away and peace was not achieved. In *Lysistrata* the character of the magistrate makes similar territorial demands “to start” the peace negotiation, but Lysistrata was able to waylay him and take over the negotiating herself, demonstrating what could happen if the *demos* as a whole had been involved in Cleon’s negotiation and was able to temper the militancy of the elite. After Lysistrata successfully negotiates peace between the two poleis, the women host a meal at the Acropolis at which the men are to formally swear peace and then go home with their wives at last.

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44 Aristophanes, 855.
Aristophanes had to be careful when delivering his critique; it is believed Lysistrata was performed at the winter Lenaea in front of a mainly local Athenian audience, because Aristophanes had previously been charged with criticizing the polis in front of foreigners. Aristophanes’ Lysistrata was not merely a plea for peace and an end of the war. He realized that, especially after the brutal failure at Sicily, peace could not end the war in favor of Athens in 411 B.C.E. As historian H.D. Westlake insists, “hardly any Athenians can have expected Sparta even to consider peace proposals which did not virtually amount to an Athenian surrender.”

Lysistrata was a call for reconciliation and unity between Athens and Sparta, between the governed and the governors, and between the demos and the oikos. The desire for unification and reconciliation can be seen in the way Aristophanes ends the play with songs of praise for Sparta. When Athens was in its darkest hour, in the twentieth year of a devastative struggle with former allies, it was bold for Aristophanes to end his play in such a way. In Lysistrata, the magistrate declares that the men share the blame for the women’s bad behavior because they had taught “them to love riot and dissoluteness and sow the seeds of wickedness in their hearts.”

Similarly, Aristophanes blames the oligarchy for the dissolute state of the polis and suggests that the values of the inferior majority are the devices necessary to fix the demos. The Peloponnesian War would eventually end in 404 B.C.E. after twenty-six long years of fighting, but the struggle was not over. Aristophanes was correct in worrying about the instability of the Athenian democracy, for the polis would lapse once again into oligarchy and would never truly recover the strength and glory it had once enjoyed in its somewhat egalitarian state. Thus, Aristophanes

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47 Aristophanes, 825.
argued not for an end of the Peloponnesian War in *Lysistrata*, but for the end of the oligarchic rule of the Four Hundred, and he did so quite effectively by telling a wistful and wishful story about sex and politics.