

ARISTOPHANES' *LYSISTRATA*, THE LIBERIAN 'SEX STRIKE', AND THE POLITICS OF RECEPTION*

In October 2011 the Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her tireless campaign to end violence in Liberia.¹ Part of her campaign involved a so-called 'sex strike'. Gbowee is said to have organized women protestors to solicit their husbands' cooperation by withdrawing sex until the men, too, made peace a priority. The Western media, both through official reporting in newspapers and through the less formal commentating in blogs, have repeatedly reported the women's political action by drawing comparisons with the 'sex strike' dramatized in Aristophanes' play *Lysistrata*, and between Leymah Gbowee and the character Lysistrata. In a review in the *Huffington Post*, Jericho Parms wrote: 'Employing the strength of Lysistrata, and Aristophanes' heroines of the Peloponnesian War, they withheld sex from their men'.² R. Weinrich commented in *Gossip Central*, 'Self-assured and instinctively political, Gbowee is a modern day Lysistrata, as in the ancient Greek satirist Aristophanes'

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¹ Together with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf President, current President of Liberia (elected in 2005, and again in 2011), and Tawakkol Karman, a Yemeni activist. The award recognized 'their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work': 'The Nobel Peace Prize 2011 – Press Release', <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/press.html>, accessed 5 June 2012.

² J. Parms, 'Pray the Devil Back to Hell', *Huffington Post* 13 November 2008, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jericho-parms/empray-the-devil-back-to_b_143734.html>, accessed 5 June 2012.

play'.³ A report in the *Daily Telegraph* went even further, and suggested a causal relationship between *Lysistrata* and the resistance in Liberia: 'perhaps her [Gbowee's] most famous moment came in 2002, when she persuaded many Liberian women to withhold sex from their warring menfolk unless they came to the negotiating table, a devastatingly successful campaign inspired by the Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* [sic], who used the same strategy during the Peloponnesian War'.⁴ Reports in the Liberian press, to the best of my knowledge, do not mention Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*.⁵

This article was born from an interest in the women's activism and its characterization through an ancient Greek text. It has three main aims: first, to examine the events in Liberia, and the politics of characterizing them with reference to Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*; second, to rethink the commonly used term 'sex strike'; third, to reflect on how the activism and its representation might be instructive as an instance, an example, of 'classical reception'. A few months after I had first voiced some of these ideas, and five days before the announcement of the Nobel Prize, I had the opportunity to interview Leymah Gbowee when she came to give a public lecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is a formidable woman, whose deep compassion for humankind was as evident as her frustration with its flaws. My discussion with her has been invaluable in confirming some of my ideas and reshaping others.

First, it might be helpful to provide a précis of the events in Liberia.⁶ In 2003, the second civil war in the Republic of Liberia, on the west coast of Africa, was brought to an end. Liberia, 'land of freedom', was originally founded in 1821 by former American slaves (a complicated kind of colonization, if indeed it was colonization). These settlers

³ R. Weinrich, 'Pray the Devil Back to Hell', *Gossip Central* 11 November 2008: <http://www.gossipcentral.com/gossip_central/2008/11/pray-the-devil-back-to-hell.html>, accessed 5 June 2012. See also, inter alia, B. Regine, 'Peace and the Gathering Power of Women', *Huffington Post*, 21 September 2010, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/birute-regine/peace-and-the-gathering-p_b_732138.html>, accessed 15 May 2013; and J. Culhane, 'Lysistrata's Daughters', *Word in Edgewise*, 27 March 2009, <<http://wordinedgewise.org/?p=57>>, accessed 15 May 2013.

⁴ A. Blomfield, 'Nobel Peace Prize: Activist Who Used Sex as Weapon for Peace among Three Female Recipients', *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 October 2011, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/liberia/8813782/Nobel-peace-prize-activist-who-used-sex-as-weapon-for-peace-among-three-female-recipients.html>>, accessed 5 June 2012.

⁵ The main newspaper is available on-line: <http://liberianobserver.com>, but the women's activism received little press coverage. Kenyan newspaper reports of the Kenyan sex strike (see below), in contrast, did refer to *Lysistrata*.

⁶ For a fuller account see L. Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers* (New York, 2011); and A. Disney and G. Reticker, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (Fork Films, 2008).

created a society based on American norms and introduced a constitution based on that of the United States. The resulting tensions between the settlers and the indigenous population, together with arguments about who controlled the country's considerable natural resources, eventually led to Liberia being ravaged by civil wars for fourteen years. The two civil wars took more than 200,000 lives and destroyed the nation's infrastructure and economy. The warring factions in the second civil war were the army of the brutal warlord and president, Charles Taylor (one of whose 1997 election slogans was 'He killed my ma, he killed my pa, but I will vote for him'), and two rebel groups: Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), both of which are themselves accused of inflicting atrocities upon the Liberian people. Leymah Gbowee, then a social worker and single mother, rallied other women, ultimately thousands of women, into an effective political force against violence and for peace. Of course, there is always more than one way to write a history, and this may be a romanticized one, but the version of events reported in the documentary film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, and rewarded by the Nobel committee, credits the women with forcing Charles Taylor and the other warlords to negotiate peace. Shortly afterwards, Taylor was arrested for war crimes in Sierra Leone, and Liberia elected a new president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. It has since experienced a period of relative calm and restoration.

The characterization of the women's activism in Liberia as akin to the women's activism in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* present us with an unusual twist on what is now agreed generally happens in the process of 'reception'. Typically, the interactions between the ancient text and modern adaptation are actualized by the reader or readers in complex, dynamic, and mutable ways. Nonetheless, these interactions occur within some of sort of framework that is set out by the ancient text and the modern adaptation, along with attendant controls of genre, structure, and tone. In this case, we have an ancient text but no modern one. Or, more accurately, we have no bounded, physical, modern text. Instead, the text or texts are to be inferred from actions taken by the women of Liberia, first by the journalist and then by the reader of his or her work. The reporting invites us to map what we know about Aristophanes' play onto what we know about the political situation, to see the latter through the lens of the former. What we have is a labile relationship between the political events, the news

reports that import the ancient text, and whatever the reader of the news reports makes of these three.

The reports give the impression that the journalist has not necessarily read the play but has picked up the reference, perhaps from another account, and has recycled it. *Lysistrata* has become the go-to trope for any women's activism involving the withdrawal of sex. Presumably, one effect of the references to *Lysistrata* is to give the modern actions the validation of having a 'historical' antecedent, for which accuracy and details may be redundant. Of course, a more informed reader might bring to his or her understanding of the modern appropriation knowledge not only of Aristophanes' play but also of other events and adaptations that will inform and complicate the processes of reading.

One significant component is the Lysistrata Project, an international initiative, begun in March 2003, to protest against the war in Iraq.⁷ In her study of the Lysistrata Project and anti-war activism, Dorota Dutsch must be right when she notes,

It is hard not to connect the Lysistrata Project – and the organizers' choice of play that features a sex boycott – with the context of multiple sex strikes for peace that have been featured in media, both before 2003 and – even more so – following that year.⁸

However, precisely what those connections are, and whether or not we can trace any causal relationship, is hard to determine. Also relevant may be the other so-called 'sex strikes' in Africa, notably the ones in Sudan in 2002 and Kenya in 2009. Certainly, by the time of the Kenyan strike in protest at government in-fighting, the Kenyan national newspaper was relating the women's action to the Lysistrata Project.⁹

⁷ On which see *The Lysistrata Project Archive*, <<http://lysistrataprojectarchive.com/>>, accessed 24 May 2013; M. Kelly, *Operation Lysistrata* (Aquapio Films, 2006); M. Kotzamani, 'Lysistrata on the Arabic Stage', *Performing Arts Journal* 83 (2007), 13–41; L. Hardwick, 'Lysistratas on the Modern Stage', in D. Stuttard (ed.), *Looking at Lysistrata* (Bristol, 2010), 80–9; D. Dutsch, 'Democratic Translations: Lysistrata and Antiwar Activism', in K. Boshier, J. McConnell, F. Macintosh, and P. Rankine (eds.), *Greek Drama in America* (Oxford, forthcoming).

⁸ Dutsch (n. 7). One of the founders of the Lysistrata Project asserts that she was aware of the 2002 initiative by the Sudanese Mothers for Peace, which called for a sex boycott to urge an end to the civil war in Sudan (personal communication by Kathryn Blume to Dorota Dutsch). See also J. A. Williams, 'Film Review: Liberian Women Forge a Real-life Lysistrata', *On the Issues Magazine*, Winter 2010, <http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/2010winter/2010winter_Williams.php>, accessed 5 June 2012.

⁹ S. Anyangu, 'Women Declare Sex Boycott', *The Standard*, 30 April 2009, <<http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/?incl=&comments&id=1144012904&cid=4&articleID=1144012904>>, accessed 5 June 2012. See also T. W. Harris, 'Withholding Sex for a New Kenya', *The Guardian*,

However, we should be wary of easy equations between events in one country and those in another. Leymah Gbowee was adamant on this point: she was unwilling to acknowledge any relationship between the activism in Liberia and events in other African countries.

An earlier adaptation of *Lysistrata* also thickens the texture of the play's reception in the reporting of the events in Liberia. This is the play by Tony Harrison and James Simmons: *Aikin Mata. The Lysistrata of Aristophanes*. Less well known perhaps than Harrison's version of *Lysistrata* set at Greenham Common (*The Common Chorus*, 1992), *Aikin Mata* was 'written for a specific group of student actors at Ahmadu University, Zaria'¹⁰ (in northern Nigeria) in 1966 and published the same year by Oxford University Press. As Kevin Wetmore has observed, 'Greek comedy is not nearly as popular in Africa as Greek tragedy, in any African nation', although the *Lysistrata* in particular has been performed in universities.¹¹ The title of Harrison and Simmons' play stresses its sameness to and difference from the Greek original: the subtitle suggests that it is a version of the Greek play, whereas 'Aikin Mata' connotes divergence from it (it means 'women's work' in Hausa). The gloss on the title page reinforces this tension: '*translated and adapted* by T.W. Harrison and James Simmons'.

The play exhibits remarkable prescience. It translates the action into an imaginary civil war in Africa: 'the scene takes place somewhere in Hausaland at an indefinite time. There is a prolonged, violent (imaginary) war in progress between what is now (roughly) the Northern Region and what is now (roughly) the East and Western Regions of Nigeria.' The authors comment in the introduction: 'since we had no wars to draw upon for a parallel to the Peloponnesian War, we had to make it imaginary, drawing upon latent or blatant tribal rivalries'.¹² It is uncannily prophetic of the Liberian civil war and the women's protests. As such it is an excellent example of the prescience frequently observed in works produced earlier on in what we might call the web

1 May 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/may/01/kenya-sex-politics-women>>, accessed 5 June 2012.

¹⁰ T. Harrison and J. Simmons, *Aikin Mata. The Lysistrata of Aristophanes, translated and adapted by T. W. Harrison and James Simmons* (Ibadan, 1966), 11. See also C. Nicholson, 'Reciprocal Recognitions: Race, Class and Subjectivity in Tony Harrison's *The Loiners*', *Race and Class* 51.4 (2010), 59–78.

¹¹ K. J. Wetmore, Jr., *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky* (Jefferson, NC, and London, 2002), 50.

¹² Harrison and Simmons (n. 10), 10.

of reception. Reading *Aikin Mata* after the Liberian war reanimates it. It also provides us with a dramatic precedent for viewing African hostilities through an Aristophanic lens (with the caveat, once again, that Nigeria is not Liberia).

There are obvious points of contact between the women's activism in Liberia and the activism of the women dramatized in Aristophanes' play. Both involve a 'sex boycott' in an attempt by women to achieve peace, and, against all odds, the women in both played a decisive part in ending the war and initiating peace. Furthermore, the focus in both the ancient drama and the modern media reports is on the *women* and their responses to war.¹³ An important feature of the Liberian action was that women from different religious communities, Christian and Muslim, banded together with a common goal, much as the women from different city-states did in *Lysistrata*. Like the character *Lysistrata*, Leymah Gbowee is not defined by her relationship with a man (husband or father). In her interview with me and in published sources, Gbowee has spoken about how she was worried that she lacked authority because she was single mother.¹⁴ She talks about her activism using a domestic metaphor: 'We have a saying: "A single straw of a broom can be broken easily, but the straws together are not easily broken".'¹⁵ This is reminiscent of the more extended domestic metaphors in *Lysistrata*'s 'wool-working' speech (*Lysistrata* 574–86):

Imagine the *polis* as a fleece just shorn. First, put it in a bath and wash out all the sheep dung; spread it on a bed and beat out all the riff raff with a stick, and pluck out the thorns; as for those who clump and knot themselves together to snag government positions, card them out and pluck off their heads. Next, card the wool into a sewing basket of unity and goodwill, mixing in everyone. The resident aliens and any other foreigner who's your friend, and anyone who owes money to the people's treasury, mix them in there too. And, oh yes, the cities that are colonies of this land: imagine them as flocks of your fleece, each one lying apart from the others. So take these flocks and bring them together here, joining them all and making one big bobbin. And from this weave a fine new cloak for the people.¹⁶

¹³ Gbowee (n. 6), ix–x, observes how it rare it is for African women's stories to be told.

¹⁴ See the supplementary feature to the DVD of *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (n. 6).

¹⁵ L. Gbowee, 'It's Time to End Africa's Mass Rape Tragedy', *Daily Beast*, 5 April 2010, <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/04/05/its-time-to-end-africas-mass-rape-tragedy.html>>, accessed 5 June 2012.

¹⁶ Translation from J. Henderson, *Aristophanes. Birds. Lysistrata. Women at the Thesmophoria* (Cambridge, MA, 2000).

However, despite these similarities, the use of *Lysistrata* to characterize the Liberian resistance is crass and unhelpful. Glossing the action with the label 'Lysistrata' is likely to condition how the political events are interpreted: as comic, as titillating. This is trivializing: the prurient humour invoked by the Aristophanic idea of a 'sex strike', with women teasing deprived and desperate men, is especially inappropriate in the context of the widespread sexual abuse of the women of Liberia by the warlords and their troops, which was a major impetus in spurring the women to action. In a radio interview, Leymah Gbowee described the rape of 'little girls' and violations of older women and men ('hell on earth') and explains that the women responded by thinking, 'What else do we have to lose? Our bodies are their battlefields: let's just put our bodies out there.'¹⁷

This is a starkly and significantly different context from that of another modern 'sex strike', called for in February 2011 in Belgium, and it may be instructive to compare the two events. The socialist senator Marleen Temmerman urged the partners of Belgian politicians to go on a sex strike until they managed to form a coalition government (they had failed to do this since June 2010).¹⁸ Temmerman said she was inspired by the 'sex strike' in Kenya in 2009.¹⁹ In an article for a Belgian newspaper she wrote: 'I call on the spouses of all negotiators to withhold sex until a deal is reached ... Have no more sex until the new administration is posing on the steps of the Palace.'²⁰ We should note that Temmerman's acknowledgment that she was inspired by the Kenyan strike in 2009 sees the direction of influence being reversed: the European text (Aristophanes' play) bears upon African texts (sex strikes in Liberia and Kenya), which in turn now affect a European text (the call for a sex strike in Belgium).²¹ But my main observation is that the call to withdraw sex was treated with immediate derision,

¹⁷ NPR, 'Liberian Women's Fight for Peace Brought to Film', interview with Leymah Gbowee, for *Around the Nation*, 22 January 2009, <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99725906>>, accessed on 5 June 2012.

¹⁸ 'Sex Ban Suggested for Belgian Coalition Negotiators', *BBC News*, 9 February 2011, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-12402838>>, accessed 5 June 2012.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 'A female Kenyan colleague had suggested that there was something women could do, citing the sex ban campaign during Kenya's political crisis.'

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Moreover, as the debt to the African events is explicitly acknowledged (by Temmerman), the European text (the only 'fantasy' event) is simultaneously evoked in the reporting: 'The idea of "sex strikes" goes back a long way. In the Greek playwright Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata*, the female characters withhold sex from their husbands to bring an end to the Peloponnesian War' (*ibid.*).

and the register in which it was discussed was light-hearted, rather than serious. One of Ms Temmerman's opponents was quoted as saying 'I do not want to take part in a sex strike. Politicians are not there to strike. On the contrary, politicians are there to arouse the country.'²² Faced with sneering, Marleen Temmerman distanced herself from her call to action, claiming that it had all been a bit of a joke. Of her critics she commented, 'Ten to 20% who don't have a sense of humour were upset, saying, "This is really a disgrace, how can someone who is such a serious lady launch such a stupid idea?" It's hilarious that people take it so seriously.'²³

Sex strikes in the more developed modern world arise from very different circumstances, and with very different consequences, from those described by Gbowee. This is one reason why the sex strikes in the less developed world are typically discussed in a tragic register, rather than a comic one.²⁴ Another factor may be unwitting racism, in the willingness of Western journalists and their readers to believe that sex strikes are an effective political tool of other cultures, supposedly more primitive than theirs.

The comparison of the Liberian activism to *Lysistrata* also threatens to reduce the women's resistance to the sex strike alone. The reality was rather different, as Leymah Gbowee explains:

'Sex Strike' is the headline that sells, so when reporters interview me, they tend to ask about the sex strike first. Did the women of Liberia really bring an end to the heinous civil war by withholding sex? Well, it certainly gave the men a fresh motive to press for peace.

But the truth is that the greatest weapons of the Liberian women's movement were moral clarity, persistence, and patience. Nothing happened overnight. In fact it took three years of community awareness, sit-ins, and nonviolent demonstrations staged by ordinary 'market women' – years of gathering in the roads in eye-catching white T-shirts, demanding the attention of convoys of officials and media folks who would glimpse the signs and the dancing, would hear the chanting and the singing.

Then we launched the sex strike. In 2002, Liberia's Christian and Muslim women banded together to refuse sex with their husbands until the violence and the civil strife ended.²⁵

²² Catherine Fonck, quoted in *BBC News* (n. 18).

²³ *BBC News* (n. 18).

²⁴ Of course the terms 'comic', 'tragic', 'serious', and 'light-hearted' are slippery, and I do not want to imply that comic is inherently equated with the trivial or non-serious. For further discussion see M. S. Silk, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy* (Oxford, 2000), ch. 7.

²⁵ Gbowee (n. 15).

One of the pivotal moments in the struggle was in June 2003, when a delegation of women, including Gbowee, went to Accra in Ghana to put pressure on the warring factions who were holding peace talks there. After the talks had dragged on for weeks, the women formed a human barricade outside the meeting room, and refused to let the men out until they had successfully negotiated for peace. Gbowee, accused of obstructing justice and facing arrest, threatened to strip naked. In West African society, a woman taking off her clothes as a gesture of protest performs a curse upon the men who see her: 'For this group of men to see a woman naked would be almost like a death sentence.'²⁶ All of these aspects are occluded when the actions are described as being a modern *Lysistrata*.

The analogy also distorts the religious dimension to the women's activism. In *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* we are told that an important source of inspiration for the women was Esther from the book of the same name in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. 'Just as Esther did for her people who dressed in white and ashes', says one woman as she fashions her headgear. The emphasis is on purity and humility, not sexual teasing. If we reflect on this third- or fourth-century BCE text, Queen Vashti might seem a more obvious comparison to make with Leymah Gbowee than Esther. According to the story, Queen Vashti is the wife of King Ahasuerus of Persia. One day, the king, enjoying a banquet and 'merry with wine' orders his wife to come before him and his male guests, so that he can display her beauty. Vashti refuses the king's summons and is dismissed from her positions as wife and queen. Vashti is a compelling example of female rebellion, but Esther (whom Ahasuerus takes as his new wife) is a more subtle and unifying figure. It takes courage for her to talk to her husband about the planned massacre of the Jews; she is quietly persistent and in the end she saves her nation, as the women of Liberia will many centuries later. An Islamic frame may also be important, another aspect overlooked by the analogy with Aristophanes' play. The Qur'an lays out the steps to be followed by a husband who has a rebellious wife: first he is to deliver a verbal admonishment, second to 'send them to their beds apart', and third to give her a beating (4.34). Some commentators see the second step, 'sexual desertion', as a form of humiliation. The collaboration of the Muslim women in the Liberian 'sex strike' can perhaps be

²⁶ Gbowee (n. 6), 162.

interpreted as a reversal of this sexual desertion (even though no such reversal is allowed for in the Qur'an when a woman has a rebellious husband).

The newspaper and online reporting of modern sex strikes is remarkably unreflective about what a sex strike might actually involve. What is a 'sex strike'? ('Marriage' is not a satisfactory answer.) The usual definition is 'The temporary withdrawal of sex until certain demands are met'. Let us turn to Colombia, where a sex strike was said to have taken place in October 1997. The chief of the military called for the wives and girlfriends of left-wing guerrillas, drug traffickers, and paramilitaries to withhold sex until a ceasefire had been agreed. However, the sex boycott was part of a proposal alongside other diplomatic strategies, and it is doubtful that it was ever actually implemented, in part because women too were involved in the guerrilla fighting, the drug trafficking, and the army.

There was another sex strike in Colombia in August 2011: the 'strike of the crossed legs'. This strike was initiated by women. It took place in the small town of Barbacoas in south-west Colombia, a place virtually unreachable by car from the rest of the province; scores of people died attempting to make the journey along the perilous route. The villagers had spent years trying to get the government to pave a road to allow them to travel safely, including holding hunger strikes and other more typical forms of political protest. Then a group of women formed the 'Crossed Legs Movement'. One of them, quoted in *The Guardian* newspaper, explained,

We are being deprived of our most basic human rights and we cannot allow that to happen. . . Why bring children into this world when they can just die without medical attention and we can't even offer them the most basic rights? We just decided to stop having sex and stop having children until the state fulfils its previous promises.

The *Guardian* journalist comments, 'And so like modern day Lysistratas, the women of Barbacoas banned sex from the town.'²⁷ The men came on board as allies almost immediately and this protest, unlike the town's previous ones, caught the attention of the world's media. The state department has taken notice and money has been earmarked for the paving of a road. In this instance, the so-called sex strike

²⁷ E. Montes, 'Columbia's "Crossed Legs" Protest is Redefining Women's Activism', *The Guardian*, 1 August 2011, <www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/aug/01/colombia-crossed-legs-sex-strike>, accessed 25 October 2012.

has been successful largely because it drew publicity to the problem, not because withholding sex prompted men into changing their behaviour. We should also note that the sex strike was couched as a nihilistic move (refusing to have children), rather than a teasing one.

The strike in Kenya in 2009 was also successful because it drew publicity to a cause that both women and men were invested in. This was a week-long strike directed at politicians, and supported by the wives of the Kenyan president and prime minister. There are other examples of action reported as sex strikes that I could draw on, but these alone are sufficient for us to draw some conclusions. None of the modern sex strikes closely resembles the actions taken by the women in *Lysistrata*. In lines 149–54 of Aristophanes' play, Lysistrata explains her plan:

If we sat around at home all made-up, and walked past the men wearing only our diaphanous underwear, with our pubes plucked in a neat triangle, and our husbands got hard and hankered to ball us, but we didn't go near them and kept away, they'd sue for peace, and pretty quick, you can count on that!²⁸

This is more of a climax strike than a sex strike, which is to say that many of the components of sex – such as titillation and physical closeness – are there, just not the actual consummation. It is less a withdrawal from sex, than a prolonged tease. (We would not call strip clubs 'sex strike' clubs.) All of this underlines the point that the withdrawal of sex is not a universal, ahistorical act, easily transferable from one context to another. The need to historicize is well put by Bonnie Honig in her analysis of Sophocles' *Antigone* and its reception. Commenting on the likening in the popular press of the so-called 'peace mom' Cindy Sheehan (an American anti-war activist whose son, a specialist in the US army, was killed in the war against Iraq) to Antigone, Honig declares,

The aim of the likening is political, to ennoble certain dissidents by classicizing them and to lend the grandeur of classics to the often small-seeming events of our own time. But that political aim is to some extent also undercut by such classicizations, which give the impression that the pain to which mourning mothers appeal now is the same pain as that experienced by spectators at the tragic theatre in the fifth century.²⁹

²⁸ Translation from Henderson (n. 16).

²⁹ B. Honig, 'Antigone's Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humanism', *New Literary History* 41.1 (2010), 23.

This universalizing perspective, argues Honig, is an ahistorical humanism that detracts from politics. As with grief in tragedy, so with the withdrawal of sex in comedy: treating it as an ahistorical given detracts from politics, both the politics of the play and the politics of the modern activism.

Sex strike, is, I suggest, a largely bogus category: it is not a meaningful descriptive term or heuristic. It also implies a strange and outmoded view of human sexuality. In contrast to *The Guardian* newspaper journalist, who lauded the strike in Columbia as 'a new interpretation of women's fight for their rights – one in which sexuality is being used as an empowering tool – a redefinition of what it means to be a feminist in modern times',³⁰ many will find the image of women using sex to manipulate weak, libido-driven, men rather tired. The term 'sex strike' suggests that ordinarily sex is a kind of work, performed by a woman for a man (men never go on 'sex strike', it is always women), and that for her to withhold sex is a similar kind of political action to those of labour stoppages by unionized workers.³¹

Surprisingly, there is little questioning in the journalism on modern sex strikes of the achievability of a sex strike. Scholarship on the sex strike in *Lysistrata*, in contrast, tends to view the possibility that a real strike might have taken place in ancient Athens with a good deal of scepticism, not only because of the implausibility of women organizing mass action but also because the withdrawal of sex by wives is unlikely to have been effective leverage. Thus Blake Morrison comments:

How do you get round the seeming illogic of the strike itself – the premise that a man cannot find sexual relief if his wife refuses him was clearly ridiculous in ancient Athens, where large numbers of rent boys and prostitutes were available.³²

Paul Cartledge writes:

Only in the world of comic fantasy... could Aristophanes' female protagonists have conveniently 'forgotten' the availability to the husbands of a wide variety of extra-marital sexual outlets (messmates, boys, slaves, prostitutes etc)... the 'plot' of *Lysistrata* depends for its success on a prodigious suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience.³³

³⁰ Montes (n. 27).

³¹ In the Kenyan action, prostitutes were paid by the activists to stop sex work for the week: a more literal 'sex strike'.

³² B. Morrison, 'Translating Greek Drama for Performance', in E. Hall and S. Harrop (eds.), *Theorizing Performance. Greek Drama, Cultural History and Critical Practice* (London, 2010), 261.

³³ P. Cartledge, *Aristophanes and His Theatre of the Absurd* (Bristol, 1990), 38.

It is also pointed out that men could have forced their wives to have sex with them. If the modern sex strike is, in part at least, about the denial of 'sexual relief', then would we not also expect Liberian men to have reacted by raping their wives or by seeking pleasure elsewhere? These responses to the strike are nowhere mentioned by the media, as if for African women a sex strike can happily be deployed like a trope of magic realism, rather than awkwardly and riskily negotiated in a marriage.

Leymah Gbowee was forthcoming about the practicalities of the sex strike. She said that when the strike was first suggested, by a Muslim woman ('We all thought she was mad. We wondered whether she could truly be a Muslim!'), it was not taken seriously. It won favour as a means of engaging the men and making them listen: 'The message was that while the fighting continued, no one was innocent – not doing anything to stop it made you guilty.'³⁴ This worked best, said Gbowee, in rural communities where the women put a strong religious spin on their actions, but in urban communities, once the strike had started, women came to meetings with bruises on their faces. Their husbands had raped them, or had beaten them until they 'consented' to opt out of the strike. This was the reality of the Liberian 'sex strike' that has so charmed the Western media. In her memoir, Leymah Gbowee devotes less than a page to the sex strike and concludes, '*It had little or no practical effect*, but it was extremely valuable in getting us media attention'.³⁵

An important axiom to emerge from reception studies is that reception is a two-way process wherein a modern adaptation changes our perception of an ancient text, and an ancient text can also change our understanding of a modern appropriation. Classicists are frequently concerned with the elucidation of the ancient by the modern, and this article could have chosen to address the question of whether the events in Liberia and the reporting of them might prompt us to reassess readings of Aristophanes' play, and whether they can release meanings from Aristophanes' play that the ancient text holds prefiguratively.³⁶ For example, it could have discussed whether or not withdrawal of sex by the Liberian women, which was more about shame and criticism

³⁴ Gbowee (n. 6), 147.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

³⁶ I am using the language of Bakhtin here, as discussed in E. Hall, 'Towards a Theory of Performance Reception', in Hall and Harrop (n. 32), 13.

than denying an outlet for sexual release, might move us to reconstitute the sexual relations in Aristophanes' play; whether, in other words, we might reinterpret or reframe the scenes of teasing in *Lysistrata*. It could have examined how Leymah Gbowee's self-exposure might suggest different possibilities for how a director or adaptor interprets and stages the striptease of Diallage (Reconciliation) at the end of *Lysistrata*. It could also have discussed how the modern myth of Lysistrata reduces the ancient play, ignoring its mytho-poetic and ritual aspects that, in turn, give us a much more complicated set of gender and political relations than the common 'Lysistrata = sex strike' equation allows. Instead, its focus has been on the question of how *Lysistrata* has been used as an interpretative lens through which to view the Liberian women's resistance. This is, I have argued, an irresponsible use of the classical, in which an ancient text is deployed in a manner that trivializes the modern political debate and silences modern political agents. It is not so much an abuse of antiquity, as an abuse of modernity.

An attendant observation is that, with some notable exceptions, it is only rarely in reception studies that classicists make negative value judgements about 'receptions' of the classics.³⁷ This is partly, I suspect, because of a general tendency in current scholarship to avoid making negative evaluations of texts. So we do not say, for example, that Lucian's *Dialogues of the Fishermen* is dull and without literary merit (a judgement typical of the nineteenth century); we say instead that it is ludic, playful, and sophisticated. Moreover, I think there is a reluctance to criticize that is specific to reception studies. This has two aspects. First, we are often so pleased to embrace appropriations and adaptations of ancient texts, partly because in economically and ideologically challenged times we are under pressure to be 'relevant' (whatever that means), that this impetus sometimes leads to a less critical approach to new uses of classical texts than might otherwise be taken. Second, scholars are understandably chary of the charge of elitism. Reception's interest in 'the democratic turn'³⁸ in the reception of

³⁷ Relevant here are the different perspectives of Martindale and Fleming in C. Martindale, 'Thinking Through Reception', and K. Fleming, 'The Use and Abuse of Antiquity: The Politics and Morality of Appropriation', in C. Martindale and R. F. Thomas (eds.), *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Oxford, 2006), 1–13 and 127 respectively.

³⁸ On which see L. Hardwick and C. Stray, 'Introduction: Making Connections', in L. Hardwick and C. Stray eds., *A Companion to Classical Receptions* (Oxford, 2008), 1–9.

classical heritage can make us hesitant to criticize uses of the classics in popular culture.

Classical reception can be an expansive, creative, and interrogatory approach to understanding the present through the past, and the past through the present. As Miriam Leonard and Yopie Prins have shown, 'Classical reception...can become contemporary political activism'.³⁹ However, it can also be reductive, unimaginative, and blinkered, and it can damage contemporary political activism. At the end of our interview I asked Leymah Gbowee whether she had ever read *Lysistrata*. She said that she had, but only recently. She had won an award and a friend gave her a copy of the play as a celebratory gift. I asked her what she thought about the play and the comparisons that have been made in the press. She said nothing, but gave a long look of unmitigated contempt.

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³⁹ M. Leonard and Y. Prins, 'Foreword: Classical Reception and the Political', in Leonard and Prins (eds.), *Classical Reception and the Political*, special issue of *Cultural Critique*, 74 (2010), 3, following F. Jameson, 'Marx and Marriage', *New Left Review* 58 (July/August 2009), 109–17.