

LITERATURE ASSESSMENT COVER SHEET 2020–21

Student Number	09014414
Module Title and Code	(UQ310814) Satire: The Art of Attack
Assessment No. and Description	Assessment 2 – 3000 word Essay
Essay Question/Title/No.	<i>'How important is the awareness of social and historical context to a reader's understanding and appreciation of a work of satire?'</i>
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The ancient Greek satirist, Aristophanes – born in 446 B.C. – and Geoffrey Chaucer, English poet and author – born in the 1340s – would, at first, seem as if they had almost nothing in common – however, that’s where the differences actually begin to dissipate. Both were prolific writers and saw no trouble in portraying the plight of women within a misogynistic, patriarchal system, and both also relished the scathing power of satire on their respective societies. However, as they are now both – to contemporary readers – authors from a unfathomably far time in the past, the importance of social and historical context when experiencing these works comes into question – whether or not they are important to an audience’s understanding and appreciation of the work, or if they can be fully understood and appreciated out with the added elements of research. Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* is a tale of female protest against the absurdity of the artificial barriers put forth against women, and in that way they are truly timeless – however, with regards to Aristophanes’ own political beliefs, and the particular standing of women in Greek society, a lack of context does hamper an audience’s appreciation of the strides made by Aristophanes. Similarly, while Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale* are stories of a single woman fighting the stringent restrictions of the Medieval marital system, and the oppression of women overall by the church – and, as such are relatively timeless – her particular defences against Medieval society and the work of St. Jerome are fairly obscure without reference to the social and historical context of the work.

Both satirical pieces benefit greatly from the audience being aware of their historical context, and references to their historical surroundings are found aplenty among their satiric comedy. While Aristophanes’ satiric comedy lambasts the perception and role of gendered stereotypes in ancient Greece, it’s also – as Alan H. Sommerstein so aptly details; ‘a dream about peace, conceived at a time when Athens was going through the most desperate crisis she had known since the Persian War’.¹ We also find that readers of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* - in this case, those relating to the *Wife of Bath* – while finding them to be accessible pieces of literature, will most likely have their reading experience greatly improved by a knowledge of the historical context of Chaucer’s time. As is reinforced by Paul Strohm, in his 1994 work *Social Chaucer – The Canterbury Tales* ‘situate Chaucer in history by describing his position (or seeming lack of position) on salient events of the day’.² What we find then, is that the characters – while not bogged-down by the burden of historical context – become focal-points for those who wish to glean an understanding and appreciation of the finer features of the satirical work. This is reiterated by Elaine Tuttle Hansen, as she proclaims that the *Wife* ‘has become a figure to be reckoned with by anyone interested in the history, both factual and literary, of women before 1500’.³

However, as mentioned before, the idea of literature as a whole is for it to be appreciated by and accessible to readers from a decade of its publication to multiple millennia – as I found myself, with *Lysistrata*. Yet, times change and as such common social norms and points of satirical criticism may well have become

¹ Sommerstein, Alan H., ‘Preface to *Lysistrata*’, *Lysistrata and Other Plays* (London: Penguin : 2002), p.133

² Strohm, Paul, ‘Preface’, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, MA : First Harvard University Press : 1994), p.ix

³ Hansen, Elaine Tuttle, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Oxford : University of California Press : 1992), p.26

obsolete in the time that has passed. As such, there is an element of pre-education regarding Satire, as - to fully appreciate the work as it was intended – the social and historical context of the time in which it was written need to be considered. Knight continues in his explanation of the satirical genre, as he expounds this problematic relationship, stating that ‘the referential function of satire implies an audience sufficiently informed of the context for the message to be comprehended’.⁴ James Robson, in his assessment of *Lysistrata*, frames this point with regards to Aristophanes’ work, detailing; ‘his plays can be somewhat difficult to understand: the conventions of his theatre; his allusions to unfamiliar people, places and objects – indeed, his whole conception of playwriting – more for comedies that can seem as complex as intangible as the rich culture they grew out of’.⁵ Chaucer’s work is not infallible in this regard either, as while we find that *The Wife of Bath* is ‘particularly essential for comprehending women in the Middle Ages’, this is ‘an era remote enough from our own so the common social presumptions do not pertain’ – and as such, context is most definitely needed for a fuller understanding of the satirical work.⁶

While many of us may like to think of the ancient Greeks as a peaceful, philosophical people the truth of the matter is that they had power-struggles and had declarations of war like and human civilisation. In the time of Aristophanes, we find his home of Athens in ‘a time of extreme political turbulence’ – yet as he grew, Aristophanes was nurtured by a home ‘at the height of her power and fame. For a generation the city had been governed by a radical form of democracy, under which all adult male citizens had an equal share in policy decisions’.⁷ However, this power soon diminished under the weight of what we now call the Peloponnesian War, and this Athens – one of disregard and disrepair, due to the war – is where we find ourselves as *Lysistrata* begins. As Sommerstein notes; ‘Then, in 413, everything went wrong. The Sicilians defeated and destroyed the Athenian expedition; Sparta, on the advice of brilliant former Athenian general Alcibiades, seized and fortified a permanent base a few miles from Athens; and the crisis resulted which forms the background to *Lysistrata*’⁸ This historical context is important to our understanding of the background in which we find our titular protagonist; as she sees the chaos the war has wrought on Athens, and wishes to see it ended - as she begins on formulating her plan, she proclaims that; ‘Why, Calonice, we women have the salvation of all Greece in our hands.’⁹

As mentioned briefly before, work relating to the plight of women in society is not something the literary establishment has found a need for, yet *Lysistrata* finds itself as the cornerstone of Feminist comedy. As Gloria Kaufman writes; ‘Feminist humour and satire are not new. Perhaps the best known example of both dates from the 5th

⁴ Knight, Charles A., *The Literature of Satire*, (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press : 2004) p.45

⁵ Robson, James, ‘Preface’, *Aristophanes: An Introduction* (London : Bloomsbury : 2013), p.ix

⁶ Stuard, Susan Mosher, ‘Introduction’, *Women in Medieval Society* (Pennsylvania, PA : University of Pennsylvania Press : 1989), p.01

⁷ Sommerstein, *Lysistrata and Other Plays*, p.xv

⁸ Sommerstein, *Lysistrata and Other Plays*, p.xvi-xvii

⁹ Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, in *Lysistrata and Other Plays*, ed. and trans. Alan H. Sommerstein (London: Penguin : 2002), p.142

century B.C.’.¹⁰ In ancient Greek society, as with our own, women find themselves earmarked for particular areas of society – we find that ‘women are associated with the domestic unit, which stands in opposition to the larger society with which men are involved. Women’s concerns thus are particularistic, centring in their familial and other personal relationships, as opposed to the higher level, integrative concerns of the male public world’.¹¹ *Lysistrata* builds on that social context, with the women – in this case, Calonice, commenting on her role in society – or, perhaps, her lack of one; ‘what do we ever do but sit at home looking pretty, wearing saffron gowns and make-up and Cimberic shifts and giant slippers?’.¹² Referring back to the ‘higher level, integrative concerns’ the men find themselves with – that being as men are ‘the purveyors of the universalistic, of religion, ritual and politics’ – the satire of *Lysistrata* works from this understanding of the male role, as well as the aforementioned female role.¹³ As the men are those who are attempting to control the Athenian war-effort, and – contextually – not doing a brilliant job of it – the satire of the piece comes from the women, who are not expected or understood to have the capacity to work in these fields, making more intelligent decisions regarding them than the men. Describing how the women would attempt to unravel the messy nature of the war, the women use their ‘homely’ knowledge to detail how, ‘with the help of our spindles we pull it gently, now in this direction, now in that, and it all unravels. That’s how we’ll unravel this war, if you’ll let us, unpicking it by sending diplomatic missions, now in this direction, now in that.’¹⁴ This application of their ‘natural’ domestic knowledge to supply answers for ‘grander’ problems is also employed as they argue over women’s compatibility with the role of organisation of the Athenian treasury. When asked what they would ‘do’ once they take the Acropolis from male hands, they rebuke that ‘Why we’ll take charge of it / *You* in charge of state money? / Well, what’s so strange about that? We’ve always been in charge of all your housekeeping finances.’¹⁵

As has been mentioned just before, in *Lysistrata* we find the women using their domestic knowledge to solve complex problems of the Athenian state – showing that women are more than capable of doing that which had been restricted only to men, and in all cases doing a better job than them. These answers, along with their continual celibate protest of against the Peloponnesian War, find the women entering into and then restricting men from entering areas which represent their own natural proficiency – of politics, and power. As Froma I. Zeitlin notes; ‘The *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazousage* stage the intrusion of women into the public spaces of Athens – the Acropolis and Agora, respectively’.¹⁶ This is reflected in the play, as *Lysistrata* proclaims that ‘The Citadel of Athena is now in the woman’s hands [...] Now we’ll go up on the Acropolis, join the others, and make sure the doors are barred’.¹⁷ The audience’s awareness of the social context in which women found themselves in during the time of the ancient Greeks is incredibly important to their understanding of

¹⁰ Kaufman, Gloria, ‘Introduction’, *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor & Satire* (Bloomington, IN : Indiana University Press : 1980), p.15

¹¹ Dubisch, Jill, ‘Greek Women: Sacred or Profane’, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 1(1) (May 1983), p.185

¹² Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, p.142

¹³ Dubisch, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, p.185

¹⁴ Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, p.163

¹⁵ Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, p.160

¹⁶ Zeitlin, Froma I., ‘Travesties of Gender and Genre in Aristophanes’ “*Thesmophoriazousae*”’, *Critical Inquiry* 8(2), (Winter, 1981), p.201

¹⁷ Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, p.149

the conflict it creates between both gender-groups, and an appreciation of the symbolic nature of it all. As Gloria Kaufman, writing for *Pulling Our Own Stings: Feminist Humour & Satire*, states; 'The play presents men as incompetent in their roles as leaders of state and reveals women as having a more valid social perspective'.¹⁸

If there is one element of *Lysistrata* which has penetrated the communal memory of Aristophanes' work, it is that of its protagonists' unusual form of protest – that they may withhold sexual gratification until the war has come to an end. This is unexpected. As women found themselves as domestic creatures, fit only for catering to their husbands' wishes, and forgoing any sexual independence, to become sexualised objects for their husband's pleasure. In this context, we find that 'Lysistrata's proposed scheme has a twist to it, however. [that] the roles these women play entail their acting more like women than they already do. In stepping into the roles of women: as ideal images of sexuality in the eyes of their husbands.'¹⁹ This form of protest is at the heart of the women's plan for control of the war-effort, as Lysistrata has them recite it to her, that; 'I will not allow either lover nor husband – [...] to approach me in a state of erection [...] And I will live at home in unsullied chastity – [...] wearing my saffron gown and my sexiest make-up [...] to inflame my husband's ardour [...] But I will never willingly yield myself to him'.²⁰ As Lysistrata hopes, and ultimately proves, the men's 'desires for sexual activity ultimately overpower their desires to make war' – satirizing the relationship ancient-Greek heterosexual couples have with sex, as that of dominance and submission - from the man to the women respectively.

In writing *The Canterbury Tales* in 1386, Chaucer was unknowingly partaking in contributing to a cultural movement in England which came to be regarded in retrospect as a momentous diversion to the norms of the time. As R.B. Dobson informs us; 'the late fourteenth century was commonly viewed as a decisive watershed in the social, political and religious history of England'.²¹ The writings of St. Jerome are themselves a rebuttal of earlier Christian writings, yet they find themselves under direct contest by the sexually promiscuous actions and proclamations of the Wife of Bath. As Conor McCarthy reiterates, St. Jerome's writing found itself 'influencing anti-matrimonial writing throughout the Middle Ages, and famously providing much of the source material for Chaucer's *Wife of Bath Prologue*'.²² As Warren S. Smith details; 'Jerome's presence is quickly felt in the Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale' – as we find that many of her points made in her *Prologue* and *Tale* are direct rebuttals to his own works; a point of historical context which may well have not been noticed by contemporary readers.²³ The Wife begins her *Prologue* by explaining how her multitude of marriages should be not only accepted, but encouraged by the church. She, like the many religious academics who had previously tried to demean and belittle her, references the Bible herself. She retells the story of King Solomon, declaring; 'Take wise King Solomon of long

¹⁸ Kaufman, *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor & Satire*, p.15

¹⁹ Taaffe, *Aristophanes and Women*, p.51

²⁰ Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, pp. 148-149

²¹ Dobson, R.B., 'Introduction', *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London : Macmillan : 1989), p.12

²² McCarthy, Conor, *Marriage in Medieval England: Law, Literature, and Practice* (Suffolk : Boydell ; 2004), p.107

²³ Smith, Warren S., 'The Wife of Bath Debates Jerome', *The Chaucer Review*, 32(2) (1997), p.133

ago; / We hear he had a thousand wives or so, / And would to God it were allowed to me / To be refreshed, aye, half so much as he!²⁴ This is bolstered by Smith, who states that; ‘In the Prologue to the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, Chaucer provides a response to Jerome’s strident defence of celibacy’.²⁵ This specific point on the defence of multiple marriages, is in direct defence of the belief of St. Jerome that ‘it is more tolerable for a woman to prostitute herself to one man than to many’.²⁶ The knowledge of the historical context of this rebuttal is important as deepens a reader’s understanding of why she chooses to defend her multiple marriages in the first place, and also allows the reader to appreciate the satirical edge of the remark, as she uses the power of the Bible against the accuser instead of allowing it to be constantly used as a weapon against her.

As we have already found, with our analysis of *Lysistrata*, and we shall find reinforced by the writings of Susan Mosher Stuard; ‘Social history aids in understanding women’s condition in any age’.²⁷ In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer detailed the lives of a multitude of characters - including our Wife of Bath – and in doing so, he created a vast tapestry dissecting many aspects of English Medieval life. Chaucer’s achievement has most definitely not gone unnoticed, however, as Lee Patterson pronounced in his work *Chaucer and the Subject of History* that; ‘Chaucer concluded his career by writing the text that provides us with the shrewdest and most capacious analysis of late-medieval society we possess’.²⁸ In medieval society, it was generally accepted that the familial dynamic was for ‘a husband to command, for a wife to obey’, yet Chaucer’s writing of the Wife of Bath satirizes this dynamic in the creation of his dominantly promiscuous titular character.²⁹ Nevill Coghill writes that in the ‘*Wife of Bath’s Prologue* we shall see that she thought little of wives that did not master their husbands’ – this is reinforced as she states that being a socially powerful woman is the way to live, that this ‘is no news, as you’ll have realised, / To knowing ones, but to the misadvised. / A Knowing wife is worth her salt / Can always prove her husband is at fault’.^{30 31} A reader being aware of the social context of the patriarchal Medieval society, in which Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, is important as it shines light on the magnitude of Chaucer’s decision to write his Wife of Bath as having such confidence in her promiscuity.

It should come as no surprise that the Christian Bible, being the bedrock of Medieval England’s social hierarchy, reinforces the patriarchal system, as it is detailed that; ‘the first woman to desire liberty was Eve’ this in turn regulated established that all other women to being were considered as deceitful and sinful from the beginning – D.W. Robertson Jr. reinforces this point, detailing how she ‘may be supposed to have landed many descendants in the spirit as well as in the flesh in the fourteenth

²⁴ Chaucer, Geoffrey, ‘The Wife of Bath’s Prologue’, *The Canterbury Tales* (London : Penguin : 2003) p.259

²⁵ Smith, *The Chaucer Review*, p.130

²⁶ Smith, *The Chaucer Review*, p.136

²⁷ Stuard, *Women in Medieval Society*, p.01

²⁸ Patterson, Lee, ‘Introduction’, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, WI : University of Wisconsin Press : 1991), p.26

²⁹ Coghill, Nevill, ‘Introduction’, *The Canterbury Tales* (London : Penguin : 2003), p.xii

³⁰ Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, p.264

³¹ Coghill, *The Canterbury Tales*, p.xii-xiii

century'.³² This 'original sin' is of Eve eating an apple from the Tree of Knowledge, as is detailed; 'when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat'.³³ This reinforcement of the misogynistic Medieval social structure, through the Bible, is reiterated by Jill Mann – who goes on to detail that Medieval women were then unable to alter the bolstered views on their sex – that they 'are powerless to correct the distorted image of themselves produced by clerical misogynists and given all the weight of bookish authority'.³⁴ This literary reinforcement of social hierarchy is satirized by Chaucer, as his *Wife of Bath* as she first details how; 'Aye, there's the text where you expressly find / That woman brought the loss of all mankind', yet goes on iterate on Aesop's Fable of the painting of the Lion by the Man – of which, the moral is to understand the context and biases of the artist or speaker when understanding something.³⁵ She asks for the audience to 'take my word for it, there is no libel / On women that the clergy will not paint, / Except when writing of a woman-saint, / But never good of other women, though. / Who called the lion savage? Do you know / / By God, if women had but written stories / Like those the clergy keep in oratories, / More had been written of man's wickedness. / Then all the sons of Adam could redress'.³⁶ An awareness of the social context of Chaucer's writing is important for understanding the meaning behind the Fable's inclusion, as it reinforces the Church's hand in the creation and reinforcement of the patriarchal society in which Chaucer, and *The Wife of Bath*, find themselves in.

In conclusion, while an audience does not necessarily require an awareness of social and historical contexts to understand a work of satire – mostly due to humanity's unfortunate inability to move on from the problems which have plagued us from time immemorial – the scathing literary attacks of the satire can then only be skin-deep scars. For the full ferocity of the satire to be appreciated, the historical and social contexts are sorely required. With regards to Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, his comedic attack on the shoddy assembly and upkeep of Athenian patriarchal society does not require an awareness of social and historical contexts to appreciate its anti-war, and Feminist themes as they are timeless struggles and the actions of *Lysistrata* and her band of protesting women as they occupy and oversee the 'masculine' places of power are still relatable today. However, Aristophanes' personal opinions on the Peloponnesian War, and the particular aspects of the social context of Athenian culture are lost on the audience. Similarly, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath* his passionate attack on the misogynistic hetero-monogamy of Medieval England and influence of the Church on said system do not require an awareness of social and historical contexts to appreciate *The Wife of Bath*'s complaints as many of her gripes are still prevalent today – although diminished greatly. However, her constant rebuking of the writings of St. Jerome, and the intricacies of the messaging of the Church relating to the social and marital hierarchies most likely would have been unknown to the reader.

³² Robertson Jr., D.W., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspective* (Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press : 2015), p.471

³³ 'Genesis 3:6', *King James Bible : The Preserved and Living Word of God* [accessed: 23/04/2021] <<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Genesis-Chapter-3/>>

³⁴ Mann, Jill, 'Introduction', *Feminizing Chaucer* (London : D.S. Brewer : 2002), p.58

³⁵ Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, p.277

³⁶ Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, pp.276-277

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